THE RIVALS OF REDLANDS

BERTHA LEONARD

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AWARDED TO

Margaret Letham

J. M. CAMERON, M.A.,
Rector.

" ' You won't mind handing me up the things ? ' "

THE RIVALS OF REDLANDS

BY

BERTHA LEONARD

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THE RIVALS OF REDLANDS

CHAPTER I

PEPITA THE POPULAR

"Glory! Here she comes at last, I'll bet. Nobody but Pepita could get a taxi-man who knows Venus to drive up here under her very nose at that mad rate."

A gust of laughter swept the cluster of girls herded at a dormitory window of Redlands School, their eyes focused interestedly on the fast-approaching vehicle traversing the long, straight drive; wheels flinging back spurts of dust as a scratching hen does.

"Pep's certainly the pep in pepper," was a chuckling remark that followed the joyfully anticipatory one of Pepita Malcolm's chief crony, Jill Bartlett.

"Rather! And it's a jolly good job for her," cried another of the onlookers, "that Venus has sense enough to realize that every school is bound to *get* its dose of pepper."

"H'm! It would probably have meant 'Home Sweet Home' for Pepita terms ago otherwise," came a dryly-spoken hazard.

"Oh, I don't know," rapped out Jill, in swift defence of her chum. "Pep's a bit lawless, I'll admit, but she manages to keep on the right side of all the mistresses somehow or other. She's frightfully fascinating. I'm certain Venus thinks her an awfully interesting sort."

"Interesting! My goodness, I should say so!" was the laughing retort Jill got. "Wouldn't Redlands seem rummy without her? You never know what mood she'll be in from one minute to another. A pretty hilarious one at this present by the look of her—she's half out of her old bus already. Quickly! Let's hide. She'll be up here in a few ticks."

But the glowing personality of the girl, who, a few minutes later, burst into Dormie Six, drew mirthful faces from their hiding-places like magnet drawing steel.

"*Kids!* As though I didn't spot all your pates at the window a mile off!" she scoffed, and stood at gaze, a lithe figure with a mop of silky-black curls, poppy-red cheeks, and black eyes that mocked the grinning emergers. Then as they flocked about her, babbling welcomes and light queries, one of her shoulders was raised in a characteristically petulant gesture they all knew, and her face underwent one of its lightning changes, mockery giving place to rueful impatience.

"Behold me torn to shreds between the emotions

of love and hate!" she cried, striking a melodramatic attitude.

That she had the power to indulge very thoroughly in either emotion at will would have probably been the judgment of an adult student of temperament; but at fourteen Pepita's fierce loves and hates were a source of entertainment to her schoolmates; transient as flashes of summer lightning, and as little to be worried about—generally speaking.

"I *love* getting back to you all. A time when I won't be doing it simply doesn't bear thinking about," she rattled on. "But I hate leaving Gran and the Abbey more every term. Gran's positively *devastated* to-day. Heigh-ho!"

"Bunkum!" teased a listener. "You mean you hate leaving luxury and laziness for lawfulness and lessons, and you just look on we others as leavening the lump of school dough. As for your Grannie, I'll bet she's breathing easily now the first time for weeks."

Words of undiluted chaff, every girl there knew, for each one of the number had, at one time or another, been an appreciative visitor at Denning Abbey, and seen for herself Lady Denning's idolizing of the girl whose bubbling spirits seemed to invest the austere interior of the old Abbey with lightness and laughter.

But the barb of teasing missed its mark for once. A pucker of half-vexed puzzlement was drawing Pepita's strong black brows almost together.

"Don't I wish I could think so!" she cried vibrantly. "If she weren't such a darling, I'd call her a positive fusser. If you could see the hot and bothered state she gets into when I'm leaving, and hear the instructions I get, you'd imagine I was in danger of vanishing into thin air. And she has got worse lately. I'd be like a grub in a cocoon if she had her way."

"Which she *doesn't* have, as we all know," Jill put in lightly, adding soothingly an instant later, however: "Keep calm, Pepper; she's old, you know; and you're such a skittish creature; she's bound to be uneasy as to what you're up to out of her sight."

"And *you* shouldn't wonder, if other people do, why she's so keen on you," came with Puckish meaning from one, Kathleen Gray. "You've told us yourself that all her other relations are pretty hoary; being the only young one left to tell the tale, you're a bit of a novelty, I expect, and are treasured accordingly."

"Hurrah! Hurrah! She's a novelty all right!" was chorused into Pepita's ears, sundry thumps on her back ratifying the agreement. But, with a snap of her fingers under the noses of the leg-pullers, Pepita poured all her scorn at the moment on Jill.

"Old?" she scoffed. "Gran old? What nonsense! Why, she's only *just* seventy. Nobody's old under ninety or so nowadays. But I wish she'd get

out of the way of talking and acting almost as though she thought I would do a disappearing trick some day. Oh, you'll see me arrive in a packing-case of cotton-wool, labelled 'This side up', et cetera, yet. But talking of arrivals, reminds me, comrades all. What of the wight who is to occupy our spare bunk? Has *she* arrived?"

Her quick switching-off from a subject that had fidgeted her, even against her will, to one of school interest, resulted in no lowering of her resonant voice, neither did hasty hissings of "Sh!" and nods in the direction of one of the cubicles cause any appreciable modulation as she drawled the significant query.

"Likely to be one of *us*?"

But that fact rather increased than lessened the astonishment of the group about her, when a tall, well-built girl suddenly sallied forth from the cubicle, to sweep their ranks with a measuring glance, that eventually fastened on Pepita, and to say, in an equally drawly tone, and with equal significance:

"*That* depends on quite a lot, I should imagine."

Wellnigh impossible though it was to put Pepita out of countenance, the unusual situation took a big toll of her quick-wittedness on this occasion, so there were a few moments of strained silence, during which her friends eyed her breathlessly ere she got out a dryly spoken, "H'm! Imagination goes a long way."

Then, while new girl and hitherto undisputed

dormie leader stood rigid, quite evidently sizing each other up, the onlookers flashed interested glances back and forth between them, and expectantly awaited a scrum.

For never within their recollection had a new girl looked less like one than did the stranger in their midst, who, less than an hour earlier, had been ushered in by a prefect and introduced as Guinevere Castleton.

Where was the nervous, 'rabbity' air? Where the tentative utterances, the ingratiating manner of the brand-new pupil in the presence of the young 'old inhabitants' of Redlands? New girls invariably expected patronizing, and as invariably got it. But Guinevere Castleton—well!

Pepita, ignorant as yet of the name of her confronter, was quickly conscious of a dominating quality in her. Swiftly she took in the details of firm chin, uncompromising lips and absolutely fearless, blue-grey eyes looking out from beneath well-marked brows, and "She'd make a capital princess", was the thought that flashed into Pepita's mind. It was given willing harbourage, too; for beauty of any kind appealed strongly to her passionate nature, and that of the stranger was so entirely different from her own colourful good looks. For there was no gainsaying the handsomeness of the new girl's patrician features, fine and clear-cut as if chiselled out of marble. There, however, Pepita's admiration stopped short; with

the merciless eyes of the youthful critic, she read their expression of cold self-will, and privately decided on the spot that the presence of the new dormie mate was likely to cause 'ructions' in the near future.

Still, that summing-up in no way disconcerted her; instead, it acted as a stimulant to her excitement-loving disposition; calm waters would not content Pepita for long; here had blown in an element presaging the buffetings that her turbulent spirit craved, so all the mischief of which she was capable gleamed in her dusky eyes and sat in the upward curl of her mouth as she suddenly held out a hand to the newcomer.

"Anyhow, we'll shake like sports before we begin to spar, won't we?" she said calmly.

And as if she, too, had been for the moment drawn into the range of Pepita's magnetism, Guinevere Castleton submitted her long, slender fingers to an impulsive squeeze.

But neither she nor any of the other inmates of Dormitory Six were under any delusion concerning that handshake, as with a gay laugh Pepita swung carelessly away to her own cubicle, followed by Jill.

"What exactly were you driving at, Pep," the latter presently inquired of her chum over the unpacking, "about your Grannie and a disappearing trick? I fancied you were sort of bothered—and I wondered."

Pepita turned on her a look of earnestness that it was given to very few other people to see.

"I *am* bothered," she admitted slowly, "and yet—being so seems idiotic, because I can't see any reasons for Gran's fidgets. You said that she's old. I suppose she is—really; but she never seems to alter much—to me; I hate to think she can ever be old; that's why I snapped you up so. I say, Jill, you *don't* think she can be getting—queer in the head—like old people do—sometimes?"

Sudden panic was in the query, strangely hesitant from the usually glib-tongued Pepita, and Jill's inclination to laugh at a question she deemed utterly absurd was checked abruptly by an unfamiliar wistfulness on the vivid face of her friend.

"Of *course* not!" she replied stoutly. "Gracious me! What are you thinking of, Pep? Why, your Grannie is an absolute marvel of sense and all that. When I said she was old I didn't mean that her brain was going or anything like that."

Pepita let out a huge sigh of relief. "Good! For one awful minute I was scared stiff. You mean she's grown just a little—er—nervous, being *oldish*. That's it, of course; and seeing her like it made *me* a bit like it too, I expect."

Jill's laugh had to have its way then.

"*You* nervous! Pep, you humbug, I don't believe you've a single nerve in your whole composi-

tion! But you haven't answered my question about the disappearing trick, and I'm curious. Do explain."

"Well," Pepita's face, which had cleared, clouded slightly again, "lots of times during these last hols Gran has been coming out with things that I don't understand at all—I mean I don't understand *why* she should say them. For instance, she wonders if I'm as happy at the Abbey now as when I was quite small; whether I find it dull and would exchange it for a more exciting place and life and younger company if I had the chance; if I think she has done all she could for me, to make up for my having no mother and father; whether I think *anybody* could *possibly* care more for me than she does; or whether I would mind very much if something happened to take me away from her——"

"Oh, Pep, *stop*! You sound wound up," Jill remonstrated at this juncture.

Pepita's grin showed again. "So would you if you'd been in my shoes lately," she retorted.

"But *surely* your Gran didn't reel off all that lot at once," gasped her chum.

Pepita waggled her curls.

"Goodness, no! I shouldn't have any wits at all left if she had done. It was quite badgering enough having one remark or question fired off at me at intervals, because she *looked* so odd and ferreting and worried whenever she did it; and it

seemed to me that no sooner had I settled one of her conundrums than she was beginning to think out another. I got so desperate at last at the way her eyes followed me about whenever I was in sight, and her continually sending somebody to hunt me up when I was out of her sight, that a day or two ago I trotted out all at once something that pleased her immensely. 'Gran', I said, 'if you think you're ever going to get rid of me you're jolly well mistaken. Nothing and nobody is ever going to take me away from you and the Abbey, so there!' "

"What did she say to *that*?" asked Jill, intensely interested.

"Humph!" Pepita's grunt was half of amusement, half of puzzlement. "Something nearly as rummy as all the rest. 'What I have I hold!' She shot bolt upright in her chair as she said it, looking as chirpy as a sparrow and with her eyes like blue fire—kind of fierce and yet triumphant. What do you make of that?"

" 'What I have I hold'," Jill repeated musingly. "That's the Malcolm motto, isn't it? I looked up my Latin on purpose to read that on the wax you sealed my birthday parcel with."

Pepita nodded. "But why on earth should she have quoted it as though she expected me to be snatched from under her very nose?"

Jill eyed her chum consideringly. "It *does* all

seem a bit strange," she admitted after a moment or two. "But I expect it's only just that you've seemed —a bit different—older, you know, and she's dreading the idea of your being grown up some day and leaving her. I was awfully kiddish at thirteen, but with a year tacked on I feel a sort of importance and independence. Perhaps she's noticed that in you."

"She *couldn't* have, because I don't feel a *scrap* different," Pepita argued stubbornly. "And I'm certain I never shall. If I thought I should ever be pokey and proper, I should *bust*."

After a peal of laughter, provoked by the look of disgust on Pepita's expressive face, Jill gurgled out, "Don't worry! You aren't ever likely to fly to bits. You're Peter Pan the Second."

Having joined in the laugh against herself, Pepita concluded the subject under discussion in her usual lively vein.

"Then I'll jolly well live up to the name. If there are any ideas planted in Gran's brain about my getting grown-uppy, I'll have them out by the roots. Mark my words, old thing, there are going to be some 'rags' this term that are likely to send me home at the end of it with something spicy on my report. Our new girl is like soda water—cold fizz. And did you ever know such confidence in a new germ? What did you say her name is?"

Jill repeated it, dwelling with a wicked unction on its high flavour.

Pepita chuckled. "My hat! She looks like it—absolutely. Bet you anything she'll act like it too. Wonder who'll be top dog of the dorm in the end—she or I?"

"She'll get a following," Jill averred non-committally.

"Of *course*!" Pepita's tone and nod were careless, but her glance was warm on her chum. Sure of loyalty from Jill, her private thought was that she didn't care two hoots about whom the following would include. For Pepita went her spirited way without making any bid for popularity, which fact, perhaps, was the secret of her easy leadership of quite a number of her schoolfellows up to the present.

"She's very handsome," Jill went on thoughtfully, "but without being exactly attractive, to my idea; she's got too haughty a look for my fancy. I don't think she'll appeal much to the girls who matter most."

Pepita chuckled. "Perhaps not," was her calm rejoinder; "but a lot will depend, my dear, on what Miss Handsome does *and* on what she possesses."

"Possesses!" Jill's hands and eyes went up together. "That's just it. Ye gods! Pep, you ought to have been here to see the luggage she's brought. I'll bet anything Venus will make her send

half of it home again, unless the opulent one gets a wheeze from any of the old stagers to hide some of it. You *know* how Venus limits us, and although, personally, I've often felt furious at having to leave cherished bits of finery and little luxuries at home, I quite see that she's only being sensible and kind as well. School isn't exactly the place for a lot of fal-lals or softnesses ; it's a sort of 'on duty' time, as one might say, so it's no use to kick because it isn't like home. And it would be rather rotten for the girls who haven't particularly well-off parents if the richer ones were allowed to wallow in their wealth. Don't you think so?"

Pepita nodded, grinning at the same time, however. "Though I feel a humbug in agreeing, because I'm afraid I should positively jump at the chances of wallowing if Gran gave me any. But she never does, bless her ! I know you girls all think she spoils me outrageously, and I acknowledge that I *can* coax her into doing most things I want, but she does manage to set a limit, all the same. I love luxury and laziness, but Gran never would allow me too much of either. I remember when I was younger trying all sorts of wait-on-me-hand-and-foot dodges on Ella, but they didn't work—Gran saw to that. She told me one day that my hands and feet were made for use, not for mere ornament, and another time that life isn't all thistledown." Pepita gurgled elfishly at recollec-

tion of the well-deserved snubs, then added, "So if this Castleton girl has contrived to smuggle in more gew-gaws and the like than she 'oughter', *I* shall simply envy her the chance and wish her the luck to keep them."

"Oh, rather! Don't for goodness' sake think I'm sitting in judgment on her," Jill hastily interpolated. "In fact, I don't mind confessing that I'm as curious as the rest will be to see all her belongings. But you and I aren't the sort—and there are plenty more like us—to kow-tow to her for what she has."

"But again, there are plenty who *will*, you mean," was Pepita's shrewd addition. "Oh, well, let 'em. If it suits some people to be the doormats of the world, why should the others worry? But she does look and act as if she expects to find crowds of them about —human doormats, I mean—I must say. Still, I'll see to it that they aren't very plentiful in Dormie Six, at any rate"; and Pepita chuckled again.

"You're going to have all your work cut out to do it, though, old girl," Jill said, with a wise little nod of her head. "But you know you can count on me to back you up through thick and thin."

"Rather!" cried Pepita emphatically; and with sparkling eyes that showed her spirits in no way damped by her friend's prophecy of a real rival, she rattled on vivaciously, "And it's going to give some nice fresh spice to the term, *I* can see. Scraps and

scrimmages do help it along so. I *hate* monotony."

"There's never any where you are," laughed Jill. "I never knew another girl who loved rackets so much. If you'd been a man and lived a bit earlier, you'd have been a positive swashbuckler. How ever you happen to belong to quiet, respectable Abbey folk, I can't think."

Pepita's face was a picture of triumphant amusement. "Ah! but I *don't*," she retorted. "I mean, the Malcolms in general don't, as it happens. There haven't been Abbots and 'sich' at the Abbey for centuries. It has belonged to the soldier Malcolms all the way down ever since it was given to one of them for services rendered to the King, so how can you *expect* me to be anything but riotous with such a line of fighters for ancestors?"

Jill was immensely tickled by the complacency of Pepita's tone, and showed it by her broad grin as she replied, "Well, it's to be sincerely hoped that Guinevere Castleton doesn't come of a line of fighters as well, or goodness knows what shindies will go on in Dormie Six. She looks too stiff and kind of correct to indulge in any clawing, but—one never can tell what *any* person will be driven to by your aggravation. You really are a demon, you know, Pep. If that girl has any notion of ruling the dorm., she's in for a few eye-openers, though I'm sure she'll have a good try, so hold tight to the reins, Pep."

But Pepita's easy complacency was such that she never bothered about difficulties until they actually arose, so, with an airy gesture and a "Bother her now, though! Let's talk clothes and things", the question of future rivalry was summarily dismissed.

That Jill was right in her conjecture regarding the newcomer was already in evidence. While she and Pepita were hobnobbing intimately in the latter's cubicle, Guinevere's little apartment had held a quizzing, but would-be friendly, half-dozen Sixites, who made themselves so pleasant that they had soon thawed the rather frigid new occupant into smiles and expansiveness. Indeed, by the time five of them had had to return to the business of their own unpacking, she was ready to accept with a lofty graciousness the continued company of the remaining girl, who chanced to be Kathleen Gray.

"Stay a bit longer, if you like, by all means," she said, with a smile that Kathleen decided was quite captivating, even if of a slightly patronizing quality. "While I'm getting straight you can be telling me about the place and the girls. Perhaps you won't mind handing me up the things from my suitcases for me to put away?"

Only too eager to become the possessor of first-hand information regarding the new girl's outfit, Kathleen delightedly complied, kneeling on the floor and dividing her remarks between school topics and

anything that called for admiring comment amongst the schoolgirl treasures she was unearthing.

Guinevere allowed scant time on these, however. Kathleen's enthusiasms over her belongings received only the most careless acknowledgments. The new girl, intent on 'knowing the ropes' at Redlands as early as possible, plied her with questions that gained her a surprising amount of information in a very short time.

"That girl Pep something—the one who had so much to say," she said suddenly, in a slighting tone. "Who is she? Where does she come from?"

"Pepita Malcolm?" grinned Kathleen. "Oh, Pep's a sort of everybody's darling here."

"She won't be mine," cut in the other sharply. "But I meant, who are her people and where is her home?"

"Granddaughter of Lady Denning of Denning Abbey, near Linden. But why the absorbed interest if our Pepper's too hot for you?"

Haughtily ignoring the slightly malicious thrust, Guinevere sat with frowning brows for quite half a minute. Then she remarked slowly, ponderingly:

"I think I must have seen her before—somewhere. Her face seemed somehow familiar—but . . ."

"Once seen, never forgotten, I should say," Kathleen broke in confidently at the pause. "She's awfully striking-looking."

Guinevere shrugged. "Gypsyish!" she rapped out coldly.

Kathleen's fresh grin was provocative; she foresaw amusing situations arising out of differences of opinion regarding the two beauties of number six.

"Well, of course, she may not be *everybody's* taste, but then, neither may you," she retorted, though with a good nature that robbed her words of offensiveness. "Not having much in the way of good looks myself I can admire anyone who hasn't a turned-up nose and teeth like elephants' tusks. But—a friendly word of advice, new broom: keep on the right side of Pepper; she can be positive cayenne when she chooses."

The advice was lost on Guinevere. "And I," she returned, her head at its haughtiest angle, "keep on the right side of anyone—*only* when *I* choose."

Kathleen eyed her amusedly, though with a certain amount of secret admiration.

"Well, try it out on me," she invited. "You've got the cubie that belonged to my chum, who left last term, so we may as well pal up, and see how we hit it off. Anything doing?"

In spite of her casual tone as she replied, "I don't mind; we can try it," a gleam of triumph flashed in Guinevere's eyes. To have gained an adherent so soon augered well for her future prominence, she

decided, and told herself that she, at any rate, would never come under the thumb of any favourite, peppery or otherwise. That thought called up the tantalizing quality of Pepita's smile, and prompted another query.

"Linden—Linden! Isn't that in the direction of Calchester?" she asked.

"Haven't the foggiest," was Kathleen's cheerful answer. "I only know that Linden is the nearest station for Denning, and we Sixites have all been to the Abbey at different times—half hols and such. *You* might go there, too, some day," she added, with mischievous meaning, "if you chose to keep on the right side of Pep."

To which 'dig' the sudden clangour of the tea-bell prevented reply.

Other brains than Pepita's had been puzzling over and other tongues discussing, Lady Denning's apparent vagueness regarding her granddaughter.

Miss Vene, the Principal of Redlands, busy with interviews, correspondence and the hundred and one details attending the commencement of a fresh term, was surprised into devoting a considerable space of her precious time to a letter which had arrived by the afternoon post. Sitting back in her swivel-chair with the letter spread out before her on the writing-table, she let her ruminative gaze travel again and again over the unusual communication, so definite in its

wording yet conveying so little of the reason prompting it as to seem almost guarded.

Bearing the previous day's date and addressed from Denning Abbey, it ran :

Dear Miss Vene,

I am commending Pepita to your care once again, content that, although the weeks of term time are rather desolate ones for me, they will be happy weeks for her at Redlands amongst her schoolfellows. But at the risk of appearing a fidgety old woman, I am going to ask you and your staff to exercise over her an even closer supervision than in the past. Now that she is no longer a mere child, there is bound to develop, more especially in one of her fearless and rather daring nature, a desire for freedom and adventure ; the modern girl seems to me a creature born for excitement. So I want to be sure that she has no latitude on the weekly half holidays, beyond that given to the older girls in general; that she takes her walks abroad only in the company of her schoolfellows or a mistress, and that she is not allowed to accept invitations of any kind from strangers. I am sure that you will humour my whim and give me the assurance I desire.

Yours sincerely,

Millicent Denning.

Miss Vene's expression was a trifle dazed when at length she raised her fine hazel eyes from the letter.

Had Lady Denning taken leave of her senses? Surely she *must* be a trifle mad to have written such altogether unnecessary injunctions to a headmistress!

And yet—Miss Vene recalled the last school Speech Day when her ladyship herself had been present, a healthy, vigorous dame with not the faintest evidence of senile decay. What unrest *could* be in her mind regarding Pepita?

But the chiming of her clock reminded Miss Vene that she could afford to speculate alone no longer. Stretching out her hand, she pressed an electric bell.

"Will you please get *all* the mistresses together here for a few minutes, Miss Drew?" she said to one of them who had been expecting a summons, and had hurried in.

With the whole of her teaching staff ranged about her table, and hard put to it to disguise a polite curiosity, Miss Vene rose, showing to full advantage the fine proportions that had earned her the name of 'Venus' from discerning and admiring pupils.

"I *just* want you to listen to a letter which concerns us all, but which I must confess has left me bewildered," she said, in the friendly way that made her so liked by her staff. "One of you may be able to suggest what has prompted it. *I* haven't an idea."

But although, after reading, her glance swept searchingly around the half circle of mistresses, it

gained her no help, for on each face sat only astonishment.

She smiled at last. "I see you are all just as mystified as I am," she said. "I *had* just wondered whether any of you might have known of and corrected Pepita for some escapades that, in the kindness of your hearts towards her, you had refrained from reporting to me."

Answering smiles met her good-tempered plain-speaking, and Miss Giles, the English Mistress, voiced what was obviously the opinion of the rest.

"I think you know the worst of Pepita, Miss Vene. Of course, she is a madcap and always in one scrape or another, but—nothing serious—oh no, nothing to warrant any anxiety about her."

"Yet anxiety of some sort certainly seems to exist in her grandmother's mind," the Head rejoined, gravely enough now, for the matter could not fail to rouse uneasiness in her own. Venus was a woman with a warm feeling for all the girls in her school, but she never attempted to hide from herself the truth that Pepita's sparkling personality attracted her as few others had done.

There was another reason, too, for the partiality that she was careful not to show, though a good many of the girls sensed it through their own predilection for Pepita: that reason was that Pepita had never known her parents.

"She has been absolutely mine from her babyhood," Lady Denning had told her at their first meeting, and, learning that Captain Malcolm, the Denning son and heir, had been killed in the Great War, Venus had taken it for granted, as she was evidently expected to do, that Pepita was the orphaned daughter of that son.

So she had made no attempt to pierce a certain reserve of Lady Denning's, merely putting it down to her natural disinclination to dwell upon the loss of her only child.

Into the brief silence following Venus' last remark, Miss Giles' gentle voice came soothingly again.

"Don't you think, Miss Vene, that it may be entirely due to a holiday escapade of Pepita's? She is such a wild-spirited creature, that she might be expected to take some advantage of the greater freedom of her home; she probably twists such a doting grandmother round her little finger; but the letter may be the old lady's method of putting a spoke in the wheel of her liberty here, at any rate."

After a moment's digestion of this idea, the Principal nodded. "I think that is the conclusion we must come to," she said, somewhat relievedly. "Thank you, Miss Giles. I thank you all, in fact. I'll just set Lady Denning's mind at rest by telling her that you have all been apprised of her request. To

us it must naturally seem a little superfluous. However——" Here, with a smile everybody understood, Miss Vene dismissed her loyal staff.

Whether the reply that was presently despatched to Denning Abbey entirely satisfied its mistress was open to doubt.

She sat up in her great old four-poster bed next morning preparatory to going through her letters in the intervals of sipping her early-morning tea, and the way she hunted through the little pile of envelopes until she came upon one addressed in Miss Vene's firm style, made plain the fact that that correspondent was uppermost in her thoughts.

"Wait for just a minute or two, Ella," she said to the elderly woman who was looping back her curtains. "I've Miss Vene's reply here, and I shall want you to know what she says."

So Ella Morgan, onetime nurse to the Abbey's heir, now trusted maid and confidante of his mother, and co-worshipper with her of Pepita, stayed quietly by the window till her mistress should be ready.

"Humph! It's all that I could expect Miss Vene to say, I suppose," the lady remarked after a short interval. "Probably she thinks me an old fool; but I can't help it if she does. The trouble is that I don't want her to know, or Pepita even to dream, that there is definite fear behind my fidgets. After all, it *may* be an absolutely baseless one. But read the

letter, Ella. At any rate, it shows that I haven't given myself away at all."

Ella went through the letter with the attention of one weighing carefully each sentence.

Dear Lady Denning,

I have conveyed your wishes to my staff and assure you that you can have an absolutely easy mind regarding our supervision of Pepita. In spite of her propensity for what she would term 'larks,' she is a dear girl, and one whom, I feel, has the makings of a splendid woman. And I want to convince you that however prone the modern girl may be to excitement, lawless or otherwise, boarding-school discipline and rules remain as heretofore, so that there is no possibility of any pupils forming indiscriminate acquaintances. Therefore I do hope that you will make yourself quite happy as to Pepita's welfare, dear Lady Denning, although I quite understand how very much you must miss her lively companionship during the term.

Yours sincerely,
Angela Vene.

"Well?" came the query, as Ella lifted serious eyes from the letter.

"Quite a nice letter; indeed, a very kind one it seems to me, ma'am," was the opinion, given in the friendly way that Lady Denning liked from the

members of her household, whom she never permitted to 'ladyship' her.

"Takes up too much valuable time," she had once quizzically informed a dignified remonstrator. "Besides, if the *Queen* allows herself to be called 'Ma'am' upon occasions, surely I can't wish for a *better* title."

It was significant, anyhow, that Lady Denning's friendly simplicity resulted only in a greater respect and affection from the people who served her, and that any one of them would have gone through fire and water for her sake and that of the girl around whom her life was now centred.

So Ella's expression and tone were full of a desire to reassure, as she added, "Satisfactory, too, so far, from one who doesn't—understand."

"So far!" Lady Denning took her up quickly. "Ah, that's the rub, Ella! Miss Vene generalizes—just treats the guarding of our treasure on the same lines as she guards all the other girls in the school."

"But, ma'am, how could she be expected to do otherwise—not knowing?" Ella argued quietly.

Lady Denning gave her shoulders an impatient shake; but the impatience was for herself.

"You're right, Ella, of course; I'm unreasonable. That scare has unnerved me. I must really try to think less about it, or it will become an obsession. We're both so devoted to Pepita that we've probably

made a mountain out of a molehill. You've heard of nothing—since?"

The eyes of mistress and maid met in a long, significant glance.

"Nothing, ma'am," replied Ella; and upon that Lady Denning determinedly attacked the rest of her letters.

CHAPTER II

GREEK MEETS GREEK

THE new term was at the end of its third week before a really businesslike rivalry began in Dormie Six between its two most interesting and, incidentally, self-willed characters. This was due, to some extent, to the settling-in process; there was always so much to discuss at the beginning of the term, last hols' doings and travels; plans for games; half hol excursions; the celebrations of any birthdays that were disobligingly to fall due in term time, and so on. But the real reason was Pepita's sportiness in giving the new arrival time to find her feet. It wasn't Pepita's way, even with her love of tormenting, to bait a new girl too severely at first; in fact, many a victim of a preliminary ragging had had cause to be grateful to her for a certain meed of partizanship and protection, not necessarily because Pepita had taken any fancy to the freshcomer, but merely from her sense of fair play.

One more reason, perhaps, might be put forward as a likely holder-up of real hostilities. Guinevere Castleton's nature was the exact opposite of Pepita's

fiery impulsiveness; cool and calculating, she preferred to make no hasty moves in a game; a bad loser, she liked to be pretty sure of her ground before taking a risk. Therefore, preparatory to the battle of rivalry which she knew quite well to be pending, she gave herself up as much as possible to the study of her opponent and the winning of adherents to her side. She extended the latter effort even to the mistresses, with a success that soon became apparent. Not only rather brilliant at her lessons, she was also a fairly steady worker, whereas Pepita could boast of no exceptional learning ability, and was a born idler into the bargain.

"See here, Pepperbox, you need a shake-up," was Jill's would-be stern remark one evening during the blissful hour's laze between tea and 'prep'.

Pepita bent mischievous eyes on her chum and laughed indolently.

"Who's going to *do* the shaking?" she inquired.

She and Jill were fitted comfortably into the 'Crows' Nest', a couple of deep, natural niches halfway up the trunk of a huge old oak tree just inside the school wall, over which could be seen, from the capital lookout, the rocking waters of the sea about a quarter of a mile away. Adjacent to the high boundary wall ran the highway, but between that and the cliffs there was only a stretch of gorse-bushed grassland, that added a wild beauty to the view. It

was fun, too, to watch the wagging-past of whatever world there was about those parts, so the 'Crows' Nest' was a favourite vantage-place of the girls of Redlands, and usually had to be raced for. Still, as it was one of the unwritten laws that no *tête-à-tête*-ing pair should have it two days running, the sprint for possession invariably ended amicably, the disgruntled ones of the day merely indulging in a few good-tempered jibes before leaving the winners triumphantly enthroned. One niche being about a foot higher up than the other, the race finished with a scrambling climb for the loftiest position, and the girls below always dallied long enough to cheer ironically the panting 'top-notcher'.

As Pepita was at present in that enviable elevation, it was impossible for Jill, craning a glance upwards, to look as dignified as she could have wished, as she replied to the saucy query.

"*I* am at the moment," she said severely. "But you'll get plenty more doses of it, I can tell you, if you don't soon cause some sneezing. What are you thinking about, Pep, to let a new girl put you in the shade as that Vere Castleton is doing?"

"'Slovely . . . in the shade," murmured the aggravating Pepita softly.

Jill drummed impatient fingers on the branch that formed her rest. "Don't be so tantalizing, Pep. You *know* she's giving you best in practically every-

thing ; you never were lazy at games before, whatever you were in class. And, talking of that, she's got herself absolutely right under the eyes of all the mistresses. They're awfully struck with her, and you must admit they're justified."

Pepita's dusky eyes, still with the mischievous gleam in them, were narrowed as though she were half asleep.

"'Slovely in the shade," she repeated, in the same soft voice, adding immediately, however, "When their eyes are right on her they aren't on me. 'Slovely!"

Jill clicked her tongue vexedly. "Well, if *you* think it's lovely, we *don't*, and we're not going to stand it," she cried heatedly, the more so because she was so well aware that the touch of temper had no more effect on Pepita than water on a duck's back. But she was compelled to give way to it nevertheless ; unless she worked up a spice of paddy, she knew she would be indulging in unwilling laughter at Pepita's impudence. "At least," she went on, "we loyal ones aren't. I told you from the first that she'd get a following, and she *has* done—already."

"She's quite welcome to it," was Pepita's chuckling retort.

Jill was half in agreement there. "Oh, of course, I know it consists of the girls who don't matter much —ditherers and such—the spineless ones of the earth. Still, that doesn't alter the fact that you are our

acknowledged leader, Pep, and letting yourself down means letting *us* down too. But we simply won't let a cold-blooded fish like Vere become top dog."

"Couldn't be done!" This from Pepita, with a wag of her curls.

"How do you mean? *What* couldn't?" rapped out Jill, suspicious of a sudden ponderous gravity in her companion.

"Fish become dog," was the drawled explanation.

Jill gave an exasperated gasp, then took a firm hold on her patience and prepared to press on with her homily; she knew she was dealing with Pepita in one of her most lazy and nonsensical moods; one might talk all night and get nothing but trifling in return, unless . . . one could stir up her pepperiness. The last thought made Jill tilt back her auburn head and regard her chum with a sly smile.

"So," she resumed, "we've got to begin playing her up. She's not a bad sort in some ways, I believe, but she's the kind of girl who mustn't be allowed to mount the high horse too often or she'll ride rough-shod over us all."

"Over *me*?" The tone of the query gave Jill as much wicked satisfaction as did the sudden fiery gleam in the eyes looking down into hers.

"Yes, over *you*!" she asserted firmly, although in her heart she knew such a thing to be impossible, Pepita being Pepita; still, as it was necessary to stir

her into action, any stick that would do the trick must be used. "She can be as charming as you like when *she* likes, but she's a madam all the same. You can tell she's used to getting her own way a lot—just as *you* are, so it's a case of 'When Greek meets Greek'. And you've got to win, Pep. We don't mind *you* 'lording' it in the dorm, because *you're* so jolly and such a sport, but she's—different. We follow *your* lead for the fun of doing it, but Vere would put our backs up in no time. So—it's got to be cayenne, please, Pepper, at the earliest possible."

There followed on this declaration a short silence, expectant on Jill's part, one of amusement on Pepita's. The novelty of receiving orders from the lively band she practically 'led by the nose' tickled her immensely.

But although the witchlike smile did not tell Jill anything, the same could not be said of the loud 'Atishoo !' that came hard upon it.

"Cayenne ?" queried the late mentor delightedly.

"Cayenne it is, or rather will be," assured Pepita, and for the next few minutes she talked at a rate that set Jill agape, accustomed though she was to a tongue that so often worked overtime.

At length, "You fraud, Pep!" she cried, though with laughter, not condemnation, in her voice. "Here have we others been holding indignation meetings, and getting hot and bothered over the tottering throne of Malcolm, and you were simmering all the time.

How long have you been thinking out your campaign?"

"Oh, only since just before tea-time to-day," Pepita answered carelessly. "I was promising Kathleen that I'd stew during prep at a crossword she's stuck over, and her high mightiness the Princess of Castleton, happening to overhear, pleasantly remarked that she supposed I scraped through class by cribbing, as I never seemed to do any work."

"The pig!" exploded Jill. "That jab at you was from sheer jealousy. She knows that Kathleen and the other two or three she's drawn round her are still friendly to you, and it nettles her. But that was a beastly way of showing it. If she wasn't so clever, I'd say she was accusing you of what she was in the habit of doing herself. What did you do?"

Pepita chuckled. "Oh, just told her I'd let her have a list of the things I wanted to crib, so that *she* could help me. I believe she thought for a moment that I meant it, but when I began laughing, she flung up her head and stalked off—just the way a peacock struts; she *hates* being laughed at."

"She'll hate it a bit more yet," Jill said with a grim threatening.

"Rather!" was her friend's cheerful agreement. "She has shown me that she's ready for a dust-up, so this is where we get busy. The peacock must be pulled off its perch."

The amount of pulling that went on from that

evening onwards surprised many more than the lofty one herself. With a determination that amazed even the girls who knew best her capabilities, when she had set her mind on a thing, Pepita threw herself into the task of thwarting, in every direction, the new girl's bid for supremacy. At games she excelled, when she chose to exert herself, and now, no longer holding the reins of her popularity in careless fingers, she drove home success after success on tennis-court and playing-field, pitting wits and skill upon every possible occasion against Guinevere Castleton.

Class rivalry, however, was a very different thing. In the matter of games, Guinevere soon had to confess to herself what she would never have admitted to anyone else, that she was no match for Pepita, whose careless impetuosity won her through risky attempts which the other girl's fear of losing made impossible to her. But in lesson time Guinevere's quick brain and power of concentration set her triumphantly ahead of her rival, and Pepita, battling hard to regain ground lost by her own past laziness, had to battle often, too, against her own fiery temper, so that she should not show her fury at the flicker of cynical amusement or the sarcastic remark by which Guinevere contrived to let her know that she realized what the game was.

Never before, during school hours, had she put such a screw upon her wild nature, resulting in a

docility and attention that set the mistresses wondering firstly, whether her usually robust health could be failing, and secondly, as the rivalry business gradually dawned upon them, how long the effort would last.

But they were permitted to know nothing of the counter-balancing nightly and half-holiday outbursts that made the effort possible to the mercurial Pepita.

"I feel sometimes," she confided to her satellites quite early in what she called the 'great game of Bunk', "like a volcano with an unbreakable crust. Even at games I don't seem able to let off sufficient steam to soothe my tantrums over the swotting. You see, I'm not even *playing* for fun as I used to—I'm playing to beat Vere Castleton ; it's work all the time, really. So if I don't find a vent in a rag of some sort every day, goodness only knows what will happen."

But the vent was found all right, thanks to her own unending resource and the staunch backing of her friends.

That things had got to a pretty pass in Dormie Six, however, was plain to be seen on a warm night in June. As luck had it—in the opinion of the Sixites themselves—their dormitory had a fine situation all to itself in an annexe of the school's main building, to which it was connected by a short stone passage, as were the form-rooms below. But the passage was long enough to allow of a little more indulgence in noise in Dormie Six than was possible

in most of the other dormitories, therefore the operations of a Moonlight Supperdance Club that Pepita had recently founded were sufficiently unguarded to disturb anyone who wished to sleep in that particular dormitory. A Jews' harp or a metronome, for instance, though certainly not loud, can have a frightfully irritating effect on the head of a sleepy owner whose *last* desire is to dance to such unmusical rhythm; and the shuffling of slippered feet, accompanied by whispers and half-stifled giggles, certainly would not tend to soothe that irritation.

There was irritation of a particular intensity, too, in the feelings of *one* of the few girls who had *not* been invited to membership in Pepita's club. Unable to sleep, Guinevere sat up in bed trying to read during the supperdance jinks by the light of an electric torch. But her book might as well have been held upside down for all the attention she could fix upon its story. Knowing full well that she would have joined in no revelry organized by her rival, she yet was savagely resentful that she had not been asked to do so, thus losing an opportunity of refusing the invitation with scorn.

The girls, too, who had become what Pepita termed 'the Castleton varlets', were inclined to be a bit restive now that their transferred allegiance meant being cut out of Pepita's 'shows'. Guinevere had had to resort to an undignified system of bribing,

with a gift here, a favour there, to keep them under her flag, the sop to Kathleen having been the procuring of an invitation to spend half-term holiday with her at Calchester, the cathedral town where Guinevere's godmother lived.

To a girl of Guinevere's rather haughty nature the necessity of having to descend to the buying of friendship was galling enough, and, added to that annoyance, was the strain of trying to beat Pepita at her own game; then, too, there were the endless pinpricks of vexation caused by her rival's positive genius for teasing. Pepita's talents for caricaturing and mimicry were not likely to be allowed to rust by a gang of laughter-loving schoolgirls.

So it was hardly to be wondered at that presently, her endurance at breaking-point, she sprang out of bed, and, later, shot out of her cubicle, a cold fury in a pretty blue dressing-gown that showed her handsome face and corn-gold hair to perfection. It seemed a pity that such attractiveness of costume and person should be spoiled by temper.

Just for the briefest space of time anyone watching Pepita might well have imagined that *she* thought so; looking more poppy-like than ever in her red dressing-gown, she whirled round at a warning nod and grimace from Jill, her dance-partner at the moment, to meet the tall figure that was making a beeline for her.

Stockstill in her tracks she stood, saucy face

tilted downwards at a shocked angle, and with a grave expression on it that nearly convulsed the girls circling round to watch the proceedings, switching on torches as they did so, in case the moon went on strike.

"My *dear* young friend," Pepita bleated, peering up under her long silky lashes at the furious interrupter, "you look disturbed! It is perhaps indigestion—the conscience sits heavily—ah—h—h—h!"

It only needed this mimicking of the little Italian music master, whom Guinevere detested, to add fuel to her wrath. Like blue lightning her eyes flashed down at Pepita, who was several inches her inferior in height.

"I've had about enough of this . . ." she began, through almost clenched teeth and with a stamp of her blue-slippered foot.

"Then tell it abroad, darling," taunted Pepita. "Proclaim it upon the mountain topses."

The giggle that went round at Guinevere's expense shattered the last remnant of her self-control; she realized how cannily aware the listeners were that her own pride would not allow of tale-telling, apart from the fact that such an action would brand her for ever at Redlands.

Grasping Pepita's shoulders in a sudden vicelike grip, she shook her till her teeth rattled.

"You insolent gypsy!" she stormed. "I'll——"

But what more she would have done remained a

mystery. With an eel-like twist Pepita released herself, and, pushing her opponent back a pace, faced her with a glitter in her black eyes that startled even the girls who had witnessed Pepita's cyclonic paddies upon occasion.

"She might be a Spanish inquisitor," was the quite shivery thought that of a sudden took possession of Jill's mind.

Certainly the fiery favourite of Redlands was as ruthless.

Before Guinevere had had time to recover from her surprise at the swift counter-attack, a red-gowned demon with lightning movements had shoved her into a chair, and was trussing her tightly to it with hastily-grabbed girdles.

"No! Keep back!" snapped the demon to the comrades who pressed forward to help her. " 'Greek meets Greek.' I wipe out my *own* insult."

Obediently they drew away, their gaze hovering fascinatedly between the furious prisoner and equally furious captor. What vengeance was going to be meted out for the shake-up of the school 'pepperbox'?

Pepita soon showed them. Disappearing into her cubicle she rummaged noisily for about a minute, then emerged, carrying her pillow, a needlework bag and —a tin of treacle. The latter she prized open with a pair of scissors, then, cutting a few stitches of the pillow-ticking seam, she tipped out a little heap of

feathers on the floor, all this with a deliberation belied by the added colour in her cheeks and baleful glances at her helpless victim.

A positive volley of gasps from the onlookers, accompanied by the splutterings of Guinevere, attended the next performance, which was a liberal layering-on of treacle to the prisoner's face with a paper-knife, followed by as generous an application of feathers. Her handiwork complete, Pepita stood well back to survey it, then, her gust of temper subsiding under the merriment that was never far off, she went off into such fits of subdued laughter over the ludicrous sight she had made of her rival as set the rest of her band rolling with mirth.

"Did you ever before," she gasped out, as soon as she could speak, "see an insult wiped out with treacle?

"Come and see the bird I've caught," she bade, a minute or so later, when the heads of Guinevere's cronies were poked sleepily out of their respective cubicles, their owners having been awakened by the unusual amount of noise. Then, as they bundled out, with some idea of rescue, she let the prisoner free.

"Now watch the peacock strut," she said, still laughing.

But 'strutting' was not the peacock's intention at that particular juncture. Instead, Guinevere simply flew down the dormitory to where the Dance

Club's delectable supper was laid out in readiness, on cardboard box lids, on the floor, and, under the wide, aghast eyes of everybody, she ground her feet on that feed till her pretty blue slippers were hidden in an absolute morass of patties, pies, sandwiches and cream buns, blind, in that moment of madness, to the fact that she might have been likened to a crazy cockerel scratching frantically for grain.

Only Pepita's iron control of her comrades prevented an uproar after that. At the head of them, after the despoiler she rushed, only to turn and fling wide her arms ere the ruined supper was reached.

"Order! Order!" she commanded. "Greek has met Greek and the game's even—for the present."

With the last significant words, Pepita turned, bowed mockingly, right hand over heart, to Guinevere, then, with the left, waved her an airy safe conduct past the group of disappointed and enraged club members.

Looking out wildly from among the feathers still rimming her eyes, Guinevere rapped out at Pepita ere she moved away:

"It's as well you said 'for the present'. The game won't *always* be even between us. *I'll* see to *that*!"

Then, having shed her spoiled footgear, she *did* strut, another gust of laughter following her comical retirement from the scene.

"Ho, there, minions!" Pepita's gleaming orbs

teased the 'Castleton varlets' as she called to them, and flourished a hand towards the medley of tuck. "Thy chieftainess hath left thee a repast." Then, as they flung away from her with sheepish grins, "No? Hm! there's no pleasing some people. You didn't like it when you *weren't* invited to the feast, and now you don't take advantage of it when you *are*! Rummy birds! Well, well, there are plenty of other birds who'll enjoy it in the morning. Come along, Clubites, out of the window with it. The early birds will find more than a worm this time, and, anyhow, they'll tell no tales."

So feathers might be said to have taken a big part in that night's rag.

But with burning wrath consuming the club members against the despoilers of their supper, and cold fury in Guinevere against her baiters in general and the arch-tormentor in particular, there was bound to be another clash at once, if only for the purpose of clearing the air somewhat. Had the next morning brought the usual class routine, tempers would have had to simmer, but with Saturday freedom they got free play, and an exciting hockey match in the morning only tended to make wild spirits more riotous. Miss Vene did not believe in overdoing organized games; she judged that young people should be allowed to exercise their own imagination to a certain extent, so the pupils made their own plans for Saturday

afternoons. These plans generally resolved themselves into picnics on the sands, or exploration stunts. The latter were very popular on account of the historic interest of the neighbourhood, and also of its beautiful scenery, so many and varied being the diversions round and about Redlands that there was no need at all for two parties to clash over an outing. Yet that is just what two parties did—of absolute set purpose.

On malice intent, one of the girls who had become a myrmidon of Guinevere's strolled up to Pepita and her crowd of cronies a little while before the match started.

"Vere's had a ripping little portable gramophone and the latest records from her people this morning," she announced triumphantly, "and she's invited some of us to join her on a tea and gram. stunt, so we're taking her to the haunted Priory grounds for the bust. It's so gloriously out of the way and quiet there."

For a fraction of time Pepita fixed the informer with considering eyes, knowing full well that she had been sent to stir up envy and discontent among the loyalists of her form, then, after flashing a significant and highly-amused glance round at her friends, she drawled at the would-be agitator.

"Yes, isn't it? *We're* all going there, too, this afternoon."

Guinevere's tool looked startled; she knew Pepita;

however, with a mighty effort she managed to keep her end up.

"You're not invited," she snapped. "Only the chosen are to go."

"We *are* the chosen," argued Pepita serenely. "*I've* chosen my chums and *they've* chosen me, and we're going to run a Toy Symphony practice at the haunted Priory this afternoon. My hat! though"—she grinned wickedly—"what a din there'll be with our band and the Peacock's gramophone. I shouldn't wonder if it rouses a few spooks. It'll be quite an exciting afternoon. Hi! don't go for a minute." This in a satirical bawl to the envoy of hate who, unable to contemplate calmly the widely-grinning mouths and shaking shoulders of the listeners, flung round on her heel. "Ask the Peacock if her gram. and our band can amalgamate. If so, and she'll come along quickly, we'll talk over a programme together."

With the fury-driven departure of the messenger, Pepita turned briskly to her convulsed chums.

"Tra, la, la!" she trilled, doing a delighted caper. "If the Peacock hasn't played right into our hands! She'll be along here like a jack-rabbit in a jiffy, so listen to me quickly."

Guinevere certainly was along quickly, and to talk of something other than either amalgamation or programmes. Before Pepita had got out a half of what she wanted to say to her attentive band,

her rival came striding through the playing-field gate.

"Don't you dare to poach on my preserves, Gypsy Malcolm," she began as she halted, quivering with rage, within a yard of Pepita.

That self-controlled creature held up her hands and turned up her eyes in shocked fashion.

"Poach! Preserves! Woe is me that I should hear such expressions from one so young. Oh, fie! likewise tut! tut! Likewise——"

"I tell you I won't have it!" came the other's flaming interruption. "*My* party chose the haunted Priory first. You keep your distance with your insolence and your jazz, or . . ."

"Or?" With the echoed word, chanted as a threatening question by Pepita's chums, an exultant ring closed in around the rivals.

Guinevere included them all in her next tirade.

"If you think I'm going to put up with the crack-brained noises of a pack of young savages like you," she stormed, "you're jolly well mistaken!"

Pepita made a step forward to waggle a tantalizing finger within a few inches of her antagonist's disdainful nose.

"And if you think that you and your minions are going to stake out a lone claim to the haunted Priory this afternoon, *you're* jolly well mistaken," she retorted. "My band requires atmosphere . . . a haunted atmosphere."

"Take it there at your peril!" Guinevere said through her teeth.

"And you take your gramophone there at *its* peril!" Pepita said through hers, although only in wicked mimicry. She was enjoying herself far too well to be bad-tempered.

But it was a deadlock, all the same, and what would have been the outcome it is not safe to conjecture. Mercifully, hostilities received a temporary check in the surging approach of the rest of the hockey teams with the games mistress. There was just time, however, for Guinevere's fiercely-flung: "Wild horses wouldn't keep me from the Priory to-day!" and for Pepita's mock-fierce retort:

"Wild elephants wouldn't prevent me from taking my band there to-day!"

And that was how the matter had to be left—for a few hours. One of those hours held hectic properties, however, for Pepita and the members of her newly-organized band. Unmusical instruments for a number at short notice needed hunting up, but Pepita's 'way' with the owner of the village general stores bore fruit now. A bent tin trumpet, a drum that had split one of its sides, a tambourine, a dying-pig squeaker, and a mouth organ, she coaxed for sixpence; the rest—and it was the rest that promised the greatest din—was borrowed. It comprised saucepan lids for cymbals; a pail and wooden spoon; a

shovel and key, and a tin kettle with a marble inside it. Pocket combs and a supply of tissue paper with which to convert these into buzzing monstrosities were, of course, not forgotten, so the Toy Symphony promised to be a highly successful performance from the players' point of view!

The first part of the battle for supremacy on that brilliant summer afternoon began with a race. Once outside the school grounds the eyes of the symphony party eagerly ranged the undulating moorland that stretched away inland the couple of miles to the ruined Priory; they hoped they were first in the start for it, but that hope was speedily crushed as a group of hastening figures showed suddenly on a ridge, to disappear as quickly again into the next hollow.

"There they are, drat 'em!" cried Pepita. "Come along; we've got to pelt. The crowd that gets to the Priory first will have a sort of moral crow-over; nothing like being old-established, you know," and she led at a mad gallop that would have been appalling in the afternoon heat to any but a pack of schoolgirls.

It was all the symphonists could do to stagger along for laughter as the race proceeded. Yells of rage greeted their appearance close on the heels of the gramophoners, and anything more ludicrous than the straining efforts of the two groups for precedence could hardly have been seen anywhere. Sometimes

one crowd forged ahead, sometimes the other, the handicaps being about equal, since the gramophoners' luggage, which included their tea, was balanced by the band accoutrements which the others carried. The marvel was that nobody fell in a fit or a faint, so desperate was that race. With each rival vociferously urging on her party and panting out defiant utterances to each other, it continued until, with the girls bathed in perspiration, breathing like broken-winded horses, and nearly jolted to bits running over the uneven surfaces of the moor, the first of the smooth-turfed terraces of the Priory grounds was reached. There the parties collapsed in an exhausted body, the symphonists with a tintinnabulation of instruments that gave warning of what they could do when their business began in earnest, the only one of the sprinters who had breath enough to utter a word being Pepita —as usual.

"Neck-and-neck!" she gasped. "Thoroughbreds all; what ho!" Then she rolled over on her back and began frantically fanning herself with a shovel.

By this time Guinevere had got beyond speech, not only from lack of breath, but from temper as well. The *sight* of Pepita's instruments of torture had been enough, without their clanking accompaniment to the race, maddening to a girl with a musical ear. While her 'chosen' were still puffing like grampuses all

about her she struggled up into a sitting position, opened her gramophone, and began unpacking the records.

"I'll be first with *something*, anyhow," her grim face and whole attitude plainly declared, and at her autocratic beckoning her party strove hard to recover themselves and help her.

But from her nervy fingers the first record she handled dropped with a clatter on to the gramophone and smashed, the noise rousing all the symphonists like one girl.

"To work!" bawled Pepita.

With only half-regained breath, and perspiration still rolling down their faces, they obeyed her nevertheless. Into the next minute, and upon the blissful stillness which only the larks above were breaking, there fell a pandemonium that defies description. It seemed to send Guinevere quite crazy. She sprang up, to dance, dervish-like, alternately shaking her fist and mouthing at Pepita, and making frantic signs to her own followers to start the gramophone.

They did, at last, only to add horror to horror, whatever of its tunes to be heard at all under the symphony's din being distorted by it out of all recognition.

"Never mind! Wear them out! Wear them out!" shrieked Guinevere, still prancing, and, grinning at length in spite of themselves, her slaves rammed on

record after record, using loud needles, and not feeling quite sure whether their leader meant them to wear out symphonists or records.

Small wonder, then, that nobody heard a lusty shout and the thudding of a horse's hooves in the near distance. But Pepita, as luck had it for her and her chums, was facing the way a rider came on a madly-galloping steed that her keen eyes showed her to be out of control.

"Quick! Inside!" she yelled, and rushed her company through an archway of the Priory, there to follow her necessary tip and fling their instruments pellmell into the darkness behind its huge door, just as the maddened horse went thundering by a little way off, its rider pulling it almost on to its haunches at times in his efforts to rein it in.

Only four or five minutes passed ere he was back again, his horse's control restored, but his own evidently lost in the tussle. Up to the petrified gramophoners he rode the sweating animal, to pull it up and gaze down under thunderous brows at the trembling girls, who recognized, to their horror, the hot-tempered Sir Gilbert Palfrey, lord of the manor and owner of the haunted Priory.

Now, Sir Gilbert loathed all gramophones, but one that could churn out a jazz combination of a terribleness to make his horse bolt when only just within hearing-distance was to him what red rag is to a bull.

"Take that fiendish thing away from here!" he shouted. "*At* once! D'you think I'll have this place desecrated by such a hellish row? If my horse had broken my neck you'd have committed a murder. Off you go! Off you go, you young jazz jades, or I'll drive the lot of you at my stirrup to Miss Vene."

Through Guinevere's brain rushed words of remonstrance, but they were not allowed to reach her lips,

"Sir Gilbert!" she began stammeringly, and gazed up at him appealingly.

But, inexorably, he pointed with his riding-crop. "Not a word!" he rasped. "Away! Away!" And within half a minute he had the girls on the move, their chattels gathered haphazard into their arms, and he herding them along in front of his horse, as a dog harries a flock of straggling, dawdling sheep.

For a good mile of the way they had so recently come, but at a somewhat different pace, the poor gramophoners marched willy-nilly, galled by the indignity of their position, yet not daring to open their mouths in protest, lest they should aggravate the angry man into carrying out his dire threat. With cooling temper, however, he at last allowed them a measure of mercy.

"Halt!" he called suddenly, and as they turned their hot faces timidly round to him, they could have

sworn that a grim smile momentarily twitched his lips. At any rate, his tone was softer though still curt, as he said:

"That'll do! You're only girls if you *are* baggages, so I don't want to be too hard on you. See that spinney?"—he pointed into a dip a little farther on. Well, put that between yourselves and the Priory and you can indulge your extraordinary taste in music as much as you like, but don't dare to commit such sacrilege near that beautiful old ruin again," and, without waiting for one word in answer, he rode away, leaving a crowd of positively stupefied girls standing gaping after him.

From the vantage-point afforded by one of the deep window-places within the Priory, Pepita and her band had been fascinated listeners as well as watchers of the awful to-do, into which only sheer luck and Pepita's own quickness had saved them from being drawn.

"My gracious, isn't he a terror! But just fancy his thinking that noise could come from a record! *What* a mercy that I saw him in time," she breathed, when his shouted denunciation of the gramophoners had alternately amused the real black sheep and shivered their spines. "Just look at the way he's driving the poor beggars! Well! I've always thought it must have been the limit to be whipped at the cart's tail, but to be chivvied along like that at a horse's

head fairly beats it hollow for degradation, in my opinion. Poor slaves!" She made a melodramic gesture towards the victims. "Almost is it in my heart to pity thee!"

But it is to be feared that 'almost' was as far as the pity got, judging by the irrepressible laughter that the symphonists indulged in as they watched the routing of the proud Guinevere and her company into distance.

"I think we might reasonably consider ourselves 'tailwaggers'." Pepita spoke with mock solemnity when the procession was out of sight. "Still, we won't venture on any more music for the moment, as it's already roused more than spooks. Sir Gilbert *might* come back. Let's have our well-earned refreshments and a good rest before we play ourselves back to barracks."

Behind Pepita's nonsense and joy in her rival's discomfiture, however, there lurked a determination to see fair play in the contretemps with Sir Gilbert.

"Of course, I shan't give any of *you* away," she said to her friends presently, "but next time I see Sir Gilbert—to-morrow after church, if I can manage it—I shall tell him what *really* frightened his horse. 'All's fair in love and war', they say, and it won't hurt the great Castleton to be temporarily under a cloud, but I'd rather not let her be blamed altogether

for what she didn't exactly do; it wouldn't be 'cricket'."

It was a pity that such an excellent sentiment could not have wiped out the fast-gathering feud, but, unfortunately, the sentiment was too one-sided. When, in the banishment behind the spinney, the gramophoners heard once more the appalling din of the returning symphony players, Guinevere ground her teeth vindictively.

"If only that brute of a Sir Gilbert had caught *them*!" she muttered.

Kathleen, calmed by a good tea, had become her usual magnanimous self.

"They vanished like eels," she replied. "But even if Sir Gilbert had given us a chance, we couldn't have split upon them. It wouldn't have been decent."

But Guinevere's agreement was only grudgingly given, and even a half apology from Sir Gilbert for his extreme harshness, when he had been given a glimmer of the truth by Pepita, brought no balm to the haughty spirit whose indignity she had brought about and actually witnessed.

CHAPTER III

HALF-TERM MYSTERIES

It was as well, perhaps, for Redlands' reputation for orderliness, that the next week brought the half-term holiday. Like wildfire the news had spread through the school that it was 'war to the knife' now between the rivals; the tale of the feathers and the gramophone episode going the rounds and accumulating such a babel of jokes and chaff as aroused Guinevere's imperious temper to white heat. Even the girls who, for reasons best known to themselves, were inclined to be on her side, made no attempt to conceal their amusement over the episode, except Kathleen Gray, who, with a wary eye on the necessity of keeping in with her half-term holiday Samaritan, dared not show so much as an eye-twinkle over it, ruefully aware that the treacle, far from sweetening Guinevere's disposition, had had a fermenting effect that threatened to cause disaster to their friendship at the smallest provocation. Her feelings, then, when the auspicious Friday brought release for all who were lucky enough to escape school precincts for the break, were of great relief; she had had an unenviable week of 'holding the candle' to a difficult

character, and felt she had thoroughly earned the excitement of the town visit.

Guinevere's feelings regarding school in general and Pepita in particular, as she and Kathleen journeyed towards Calchester, found vent in a few explosive sentences.

"If I couldn't have got away for a day or two, I think I should have gone crazy!" she cried vehemently. "I've been staying awake at night for hours trying to think of a way to play up that gypsy-faced Malcolm girl. I haven't even the ghost of an idea yet, but I *shall* have, sooner or later—perhaps away, where I've a chance to cool down. I *wish* I could remember where I've seen her before—because I'm certain I *have*."

The object of her mingled passion and puzzlement was at this time travelling in the same train, and in the highest of spirits for three reasons, namely, that she was leaving work behind for three days; that Jill was accompanying her to Denning Abbey for that blissful period; and that she had succeeded so well in what she termed keeping her end up with Guinevere Castleton.

"D'you know," she complacently remarked to the beaming Jill, "I'm *sure* I shall remain the upper crust of our dorm, at any rate. That Vere is too s'vere altogether; she'll never get anywhere; simply can't take a joke; no sense of humour."

Jill grinned. "Pity you can't give her a little of yours. It could be spared."

Pepita rewarded that statement with a grimace, but sat for a few moments in thoughtful silence after it, nevertheless, and the tone of her next remark was a little less assured than usual.

"You don't think, do you," she inquired, "that I'm going too far with the Castleton crusade?"

Jill snorted disdain of such an idea.

"No, I don't," she replied emphatically. "Of course, you've given her an awfully hot time of it, but she deserves every prank you've played. If she had any real sportiness about her she wouldn't be in the fiendishly angry state that she certainly is, but would have joined in the laugh against herself and just started paying you back in your own coin. I've no patience with people who are too dignified to take *and* make a joke."

Pepita's dimples made their appearance again.

"She's *hopping* mad with me. I've never seen anyone madder," she declared. "I wonder she doesn't see that losing her temper so only gives me a bigger advantage over her; it's so easy to rag such a thin-skinned creature."

"It's her pride," condemned Jill. "I expect her people are a lot to blame; you can tell she's always been allowed to take herself too seriously; she told Kathleen that she'll one day inherit a huge estate

with a castle. She wasn't exactly boasting, from what I could gather—it just came out quite naturally when Kath was admiring all her lovely things and talking home topics. Perhaps the heiress business has given her a swelled head. But then, *you* aren't like that, and I suppose *you* are your Granny's heiress. I'd just as soon have an abbey as a castle, wouldn't you? It must be gorgeous to be mistress of a place like Denning."

Pepita's eyes were wide with surprise on her chum.

"Oh—rather! But—I—an heiress! Why, I'd never thought of such a thing!"

"Still, you are, aren't you?" argued Jill. "Being the next Malcolm you'll *have* to think of it some time or other."

"Yes! I—I suppose so," was the half-hesitant reply that spurred Jill on.

"How funny you are, Pep!" she exclaimed. "It must be lovely to carry on a glorious place like the Abbey. *Our* house at home is old, but quite ordinarily old; there's nothing special or really historical about it. Besides, I've got brothers, so I shall never get a chance to reign in it. I thought you were absolutely crazy about the Abbey?"

"So I *am*! But—I wish I fitted in better."

Amazed at the words, and even more amazed at the new wistfulness in her friend's face and tone, Jill frankly stared.

"Fitted in better?" she echoed.

Pepita nodded. "I'm not a bit like the Malcolms, or even Gran's people. I seem—an odd one."

For the life of her Jill could not help laughing at the sudden disgusted accents that ousted the softer tone.

"You certainly *are*," she gurgled. "I'm sure there's nobody else like you, Pep. You're quite unique."

"Owl!" retorted Pepita. "What I mean is, I'd like to look one or t'other—a Malcolm or a Langford; Malcolm for preference—they're so awfully good-looking."

"So are you!" averred Jill. "I expect you're like your mother."

"Don't know."

The nonchalant answer made Jill's eyes round again.

"Surely you've seen a photo of her," she said wonderingly.

But Pepita shook her head.

"Gran hasn't one, and she never seemed to care to talk about her, so I suppose she didn't like her for some reason. Anyhow, she always used to look badgered when I asked questions, so I dropped them. I expect I shall have another shot at questions one day, but Gran's been such a dear to me ever since I can remember; I can't bear to see her worried."

The last words diverted Jill's chain of thought a little.

"I wonder if she'll have got over her fidgets about *you*?"

Pepita stood up, squared her young shoulders, and reached for her suitcase.

"We won't let her think of any fidgets at all—you and I," she said determinedly. "We're all going to be merry and bright and make things hum for three whole days. Come along! Next station. Let's hope the great S'vere won't shrivel me with her glare as we pass her carriage. Anyhow, Calchester is nearly twenty miles farther on, so she and I won't be able to spit fire at each other with *that* distance between."

"Look out for yourself, though," warned Jill. "She'll probably be getting up steam ready for when you meet again on Tuesday. I should say she's a girl who would get even with *anyone* if she made up her mind to. She'll *never* forgive the feathering. Goodness! It *was* a scream!"

But featherings and feuds were alike forgotten by the pair for a while in the delights of Denning.

Situated about half a mile from Linden village, the Abbey stood well back inside extensive grounds, so wooded that the majestic pile of sandstone masonry only came into full view at the end of a fine avenue of chestnut trees that ran to within fifty yards of the beautifully-arched main doorway, so that the grandeur of dull red rising sheer from the wide stretch of soft

greensward that grew close up to the building might well have held the sudden beholder spellbound.

Accustomed though she had been to it from infancy, the place had never lost its charm for beauty-loving Pepita; but with Jill's words about heritage fresh in her mind, she gazed with new vision at her home, as she and her chum lounged in garden-chairs in front of it that evening with the Abbey's châtelaine.

The spell of the place was on Jill too.

"However long has it stood?" she breathed. "It might have been here always, and be going on for ever and ever by the look of it."

Lady Denning gave her an appreciative glance.

"It is over six hundred years old, and Malcolms have lived in it for four centuries," she replied.

"Four centuries! Doesn't it seem wonderful?" Jill's tone held a kind of pleased awe. "We Bartletts can only count back two in the house we live in, and even that makes me feel proud and fond of it. But *four*! How *awfully* glad you must feel, Lady Denning, that there's still a young Malcolm left."

Could it have been her fancy, Jill wondered, or had a strange shadow swept over the lady's face at her last words? Certainly there was no doubt about the quick shifting of her glance from the speaker, or the queer haste of the reply that somehow sounded as though the lady were startled by some disturbing thought, and hurrying to convince herself as well as others.

"Oh—oh yes !—of *course*, Jill, that is a great relief—a great happiness."

Uncomfortably Jill suddenly realized that she might possibly have said a tactless thing ; perhaps her remark had reminded Lady Denning of the son lost in the Great War. Of course, Pepita was a Malcolm, but—Jill wished she hadn't spoken all the same.

Into the little break, however, Pepita's sauciest tone came banteringly. Her shining gaze flashed round upon her grandmother in laughing challenge.

"Own up, Gran," she teased. "The 'great happiness' was just an afterthought. You were wishing all the time that the present young Malcolm was anybody but a Scaramouche like me."

Jill's discomfort vanished. Whatever undercurrent of trouble might have existed in Lady Denning's mind, there was no evidence of it now in the face, full of affection, that she turned on her granddaughter.

"Absurd child !" she retorted with an indulgent smile. "Own up yourself ! That last speech was nothing but a bait to catch flattery."

"That's just it, Lady Denning," chimed in Jill mischievously. "She's just fishing to be told she's as good-looking, et cetera, as all the other Malcolms ; she was grousing to me this afternoon because she isn't like any of them, she says."

Once again, as she finished the laughing words,

Jill had the feeling of having, as she privately expressed herself, 'put her foot into it', for the smile died out of Lady Denning's face, leaving it with a look vaguely distressful.

"My dear," she murmured to Pepita, "why bother your merry self about that? So long as you 'carry on' as a Malcolm should it is all that matters. I am not afraid that you will ever disgrace the name."

Pepita's head lifted proudly at that, and her tone was as suddenly serious as she replied.

"Of *course* not! I'll never let you down, Gran. But—about the other—well, I *should* like myself better if I favoured *somebody* up in the picture gallery. When *I'm* hung up there—if I ever am—I won't seem to belong, don't you see."

Jill grinned widely at Pepita's way of expressing the gallery honour. But there was no amusement in the lady's face, instead, she looked harassed.

"But, Pepita love, I might say the same thing," she argued. "I am only Malcolm by marriage, yet my portrait is there as you know, as well as those of the other Malcolm wives."

"Then *why*, Gran," flashed Pepita, with the quickness of one grasping a long-looked-for opportunity, "why isn't my mother's picture there? Perhaps I'm like *her*!"

What Lady Denning would have replied to that outspoken query remained unknown. The two

girls just glimpsed a kind of desperation on her face ere she shot up out of her chair like a person galvanized as a husky voice behind them said ingratiatingly :

"Lady, buy a basket from a poor gypsy."

Out of their seats in a trice, the girls stood, one on either side of Lady Denning, facing the stranger who had come up unheard over the thick turf. A woman of perhaps forty-five, she was comely-looking from the glow of health in her round dark cheeks and dark eyes ; clean, too, for her class ; no draggle-tail this —the woman was plainly a true Romany.

"Buy a basket, lady." She held out one of the neatly-woven receptacles she carried, her voice plaintively persuasive, and Pepita, amusedly aware of her grandmother's soft-heartedness where any supplicant was concerned, poised herself on a heel in the full expectation of being bidden to run to the house for money.

Blank astonishment, then, brought her gaze round to her grandmother, as that lady cried harshly :

"No ! You must go away, and at once, please. I cannot have you people wandering about the grounds in this fashion. It is most annoying."

The woman stood her ground however, with all the persistence of her tribe ; the friendly light in her eyes and a half smile that showed her gleaming, even teeth, indicating that she could not take as a serious rebuff the first words of so gracious-looking a lady.

"The poor gypsies wouldn't hurt a creatur' or touch a thing o' yourn, lady," she gave assurance. "Just buy a basket."

"No! No! Go!—or I shall have you shifted on from the neighbourhood by the police"; and Lady Denning waved her imperiously away.

"Oh, Gran!" Pepita's undertone was urgent as the woman made a reluctant step backwards, her dark eyes respectfully reproachful. "Don't be cross to the poor wretch. I've *never* seen you turn anyone away like that—without a copper or something."

As if sensing the championship she could not hear, the gypsy dallied in her departure, and Lady Denning, seeming to become conscious of the surprised indignation in her granddaughter's face and words, suddenly altered her tactics.

"Wait! I'll buy a gardening-basket from you. But you mustn't come here again," she called out shortly, though without her former severity. "How much?"

The gypsy moved nearer, her gaze warm on the girl whose intervention had resulted in custom for her. Up to this her attention had naturally been directed to the prospective buyer, but now it was all for Pepita's vivid young beauty.

"'Tis a wonderful faace the missie has, and maybe there's a lot to be read in her hand," the husky voice droned after a moment or two. "Cross me palm

with a bit o' silver, lady, and I'll tell her fortune and gi' ye the basket."

"Gran, my fortune told! *What* a lark! But I ought to pay for my fortune myself, so bang goes saxpence! Which hand will you have, prophetess?"

With a merry laugh and dancing eyes, Pepita flung out both hands, palms upwards, towards the swarthy stranger.

But with one swift movement Lady Denning thrust herself in the way.

"I cannot allow such nonsense," she said curtly. "Into the house with Jill, child, at once, and send Ella out with my purse."

And too dumbfounded for once to do anything but obey, Pepita flung rather pettishly away, followed by her friend.

"Now, what *can* you make of her?" she presently demanded impatiently, as she and Jill peeped from a window of the long, wide corridor, now the picture gallery, whither they had betaken themselves at the latter's wish.

They had been watching with burning curiosity the departure of the gypsy woman—more than satisfied with her bargaining, judging from her smiles and curtseys—and then Lady Denning's distracted air as she afterwards talked to her confidential maid.

"Bundling us off indoors, as though we were two little kids, and doing us out of a bit of fun." Pepita

grumbled on without waiting for any reply from her bewildered chum. "Anyone would think she was afraid of the gypsy carrying me off. I can't make Gran out lately. She's just as queer as I told you, isn't she?"

Reluctantly Jill was obliged to agree, much as she disliked so discussing an otherwise charming hostess.

"D'you think she can be ill?" she suggested, after a moment's silence. "She looked quite pale and shaky, and her voice was quite quivery, even though it sounded angry when she shooed us off."

Pepita frowned in a bothered way.

"Yes, I noticed; I shall have to speak to Ella about her; if she isn't well she ought to be doctored up. But she seemed all right till the gypsy arrived on the scene. I'd think there was some queer mystery afoot, only I can't imagine Gran mixed up with one. Anyhow, as we haven't X-ray eyes or donkeys' ears, it's no use our sticking here quizzing. Let's squint round the pictures, as you wanted to, while the light lasts."

With that, the pair quitted the window and were soon deep in discussion over the long-dead Malcolms, little dreaming that the possession of X-ray eyes and donkeys' ears would only have added to their puzzlement.

Back in her chair on the grass, with the maid seated beside her, Lady Denning was looking haggard

and weary in the pale evening light, her restless eyes and shaking hands giving plain evidence of nervous strain.

"How I could have so lost my head, Ella, I cannot think," she was saying. "Really, I have strangers on the brain, since—since—that inquiry you heard of. I shall alarm the child—I know I shall; in fact I shouldn't wonder if I've done it already."

Ella's face was gravely sympathetic; her faithful eyes showed anxiety.

"It's getting too much for your nerves, ma'am, this—this strain," she said quietly, though with a slight hesitation as if she feared the effect of her words. "I've thought sometimes—lately—that perhaps it might be better if you—explained—to Miss Pepita; she'd understand then—*why*—you are fidgety, and —and—what about."

But Lady Denning broke in vehemently here.

"No, no, Ella! I couldn't possibly. She's so young yet, such an excitable creature too. The situation might get on her nerves as it has on mine. I want the child to be happy—as carefree as a bird."

Ella shook her head dubiously.

"She won't be either, ma'am, if she thinks *you* aren't. I never knew a girl think more of her grandma."

"Then I must pull myself together, Ella, for her sake." Lady Denning's tone was obdurate, and she

sat upright with the air of one determined to take a firm grip upon herself. "Why should I make an upheaval in her life? Suppose she was never as happy or the same towards me . . . after? No, no! When she is older, perhaps, Ella—and only then if it's absolutely necessary. She's mine, Ella, she's mine —if nothing happens, and nothing *may* happen!"

"Please God, nothing will, ma'am," responded Ella soberly, "except for her happiness and yours."

And as though she had gathered fresh strength and courage from Ella's fervent words, Lady Denning's manner and spirits left nothing to be desired by the two girls during the remainder of their visit.

Two other Redlands pupils were having what they mutually agreed was the time of their lives that half term. Away from an atmosphere that had so irritated her, Guinevere Castleton was proving herself quite an amiable being, so much so that she was fast cementing the hitherto rather haphazard friendship between herself and Kathleen Gray. As a matter of fact, Guinevere had a fair share of natural charm; but unfortunately, in the rough-and-tumble of school life, she thrust it underneath the pride and touchiness that she wore like armour against the ragging she hated. The pleasure of an only child in the companionship of a chum all to herself for a day or two, plus the satisfaction gained from an absolute freedom granted by a doting godmother, made her so good-

tempered that Kathleen congratulated herself on having got along through the first few weeks of new comradeship without a tiff.

But not for long was she to be allowed to suppose that the friendship would carry no further penalties.

The pair were strolling about the fine old town of Calchester on the Saturday afternoon, bent on getting all the fun they could out of a supply of pocket-money, which had been generously added to by Guinevere's godmother.

"You and I are hitting it awfully well together, Kath, don't you think?" Guinevere presently remarked, after an exciting round of the shops had resulted in an interchange of keepsakes.

"Rippingly!" Kathleen agreed, wholeheartedly enthusiastic and reading nothing subtle in Guinevere's glance, where a girl of more perception, remembering her calculating nature, might have been slightly suspicious.

"I shall get my people to invite you to Castle Warren for part of the summer hols if you'd like to go," was Guinevere's next amiable contribution to the conversation.

"Oh—h—h! I'd love it!" enthused the other. "What topping times we'd have!"

Guinevere nodded decidedly. "I'm sure we should. We've lots in common. All we seem at all likely to clash over is that wretched Gypsy Malcolm

but now that we're practically sworn friends, I shall expect you to take sides with me absolutely. Up to the present you've been *rather* inclined to dither 'between two stools', you know."

Kathleen looked a trifle blank.

"Oh, but, Vere, Pep *is* such good fun. I can't help being amused at her ways; none of us can."

"*I* can!" was the swift and significant retort.

"Well, I wish you couldn't. I wish you and Pep wouldn't keep rubbing each other up the wrong way," Kathleen said, rather impatiently. "Why *do* you call her Gypsy? It riles her dreadfully."

"And she doesn't rile *me*, I suppose?" came sarcastically from Guinevere. "Besides, she's like a gypsy, so why shouldn't I call her one?"

"I can't see it," differed Kathleen. "She's *olive*-skinned, not the ordinary out-of-door brownness that gypsies have. And there's nothing common-looking about her, with all her high colour; she looks as though she were—well—*somebody*."

"A matter of opinion," Guinevere snapped, breaking into a short laugh a moment after, however, and adding: "There we go again, hammer and tongs, the instant we get on that one topic. And we were having such a lovely time till we did. Let's stop the argument by going to the show at the Hippodrome. Come along!"

With commendable good nature, Kathleen for-

bore from a reminder that Guinevere herself had introduced the vexed subject of Pepita. Hurrying beside her friend towards the building into which amusement-hunting crowds were flocking, she ventured only a chuckling, "Venus would have fits if she saw us. We're not *supposed* to go to these places in term time, remember."

But Guinevere was good-humouredly contemptuous.

"Bother that! This is *half*-term time, and we're going to enjoy ourselves. Besides, there's nothing infectious going about at present—*every*body's well in June; or if they aren't, they ought to be."

So that was that; and during the next thrilled hour or so Venus and school rules and the impish possessor of the dancing black curls and wicked eyes were forgotten entirely, until . . .

Kathleen winced under a sudden pinch of her arm, and as she gazed towards the big platform in the centre of the Hippodrome's arena a startled gasp escaped her, seeming the echo of one which had just come from Guinevere.

"Didn't I *tell* you that I *knew* I'd seen her before somewhere!" the latter breathed dramatically into her companion's ear. "What do you think of *that*?"

And Kathleen, positively agape, did not need to

be told that the topic of conversation was again—Pepita.

Whatever was the exact nature of the surprise that had overtaken the two girls, it kept their tongues wagging busily on the way home.

"I knew it! I was sure of it!" Guinevere said several times over, excitement getting the better of her usual calm. "She's so striking-looking—even *I* admit that. You see, Aunt Anne took me to the Hippodrome the last time I was here, about a year ago. I *knew* I'd seen her before!"

Kathleen, though well able from what had already passed to make sense of this excitable rigmarole of words, was still too flabbergasted to murmur more than a weak, "Well, well!" in answer to it.

But this did not worry Guinevere. She was off again in a jiffy.

"I say, Kath," she cried, "the place where that creature and Jill Bartlett got out—Linden, wasn't it?—is only a few stations away from here! We'll make it our business to go there on Monday—disguised a bit, you know—in some of Aunt Anne's clothes. I'll tell her we're going picnicking for the day. Of course, we'll transmogrify ourselves en route."

"But—gracious! What for? Linden—and the disguises, I mean?" bleated Kathleen.

"To do a bit of sleuthing—discreet inquiries and

such," was the reply of mingled enlightenment and bafflement.

There was bafflement only in the looks that Pepita and Jill were exchanging as they stood by a crossroads signpost, on the outskirts of Linden village, towards which they were sauntering on the last afternoon of the short holiday.

'Calchester 18 miles' said the white arm that pointed along a road down which a big motor-omnibus had just lumbered out of sight round a bend.

"Well!" exploded Pepita at last, and, tearing her gaze from her chum, she watched the legacy of whirling dust left by the departed vehicle as though she were expecting some enlightenment from it. "Well, if it wasn't S'vere Castleton looking out of that bus, it was her twin aunt!"

"*Couldn't* have been!" gasped Jill, all unconscious of any humour at the moment.

Pepita stamped. "But I tell you it *was*!" she fumed. "Not a twin aunt, but S'vere *got up* as a twin aunt. D'you think I could mistake a face I've looked at as often as I've looked at hers for these last six weeks? Poof! *Feathers*—or even whiskers—wouldn't hide her from *me*! And she looked—a bit bowled for the minute at seeing us, and yet sort of jeeringly triumphant. Didn't you take it in? *I* did! She and Kath have been up to something. I wonder *what*?"

A wonder that a whole evening of pondering did not satisfy.

Bafflement was the lot of another pair, too, on the following day, some hours after the return to school of the Abbey's girl visitors.

Ella, back from an errand in the village, had, with a distraught air, sought out her mistress in the library, where that lady was writing letters.

"It grieves me to worry you, ma'am," she said, in a troubled tone, "but I know you'd rather be told —forewarned is forearmed, as you might say; there have been *more* inquiries in the village."

Lady Denning stood up quickly. "More?" she echoed bleakly. "You mean that the caravanners— have been there again?"

Ella shook her head. "No, ma'am; *different* inquiries. Mrs. Jack was told they were two ladies who seemed sort of youngish but dressed a bit old-fashioned. They came from the station way, but went off again on the Calchester bus. You can trust the village to know the movements of strangers," she added, with a grim smile.

But no smile, grim or otherwise, changed the stark concern on Lady Denning's face. Her eyes turned with a dumb longing towards three photographs that hung in identical frames over the wide old fireplace.

"Husband, son, nephew—all gone," she said

piteously. "If only I had one of them here to advise me, Ella!"

Unable to trust speech for a moment, the woman gave one of her mistress's arms a sympathetic squeeze, and the gentle reminder of a friend at hand seemed to hearten the lady.

"But I'll fight for the child myself, Ella!" she cried, with determination again in voice and manner. "I'll never give her up."

"Couldn't you—" Ella's tone was tentative but hopeful—"couldn't you consult Mr. Baynes, ma'am?"

But Lady Denning made an impatient gesture.

"Never, if I can avoid it," she replied, with finality. "A lawyer hasn't a spark of sentiment. He wouldn't understand my feelings. But I appreciate your thoughtfulness, Ella. Faithful soul, what *should* I do without you?"

CHAPTER IV

THE CARAVANNERS

"HERE we are again! Here we are again!"

Thus in rollicky accents from the gay Pepita, as she and Jill, shouldering through a surge of returned Redlandsites, awaiting conveyance between station and school, came face to face with Guinevere.

"Clown!" was her greeting, spoken with a curl of her lip and a glance down her nose at the convivial Pep.

The latter put on a lachrymose expression. "And hath absence, then, made the heart no fonder?" she inquired, with a made-to-order sob. "Ah, woe is me!" Then, suddenly aware of a new quality in the analysing stare of her rival's steady eyes, she flashed out.

"By the way, S'vere, do you happen to have a twin aunt?"

The unexpectedness and apparent absurdity of the query drew several glances round, Kathleen's being one of them, and Pepita, sharp as a needle, saw an infinitesimal wink exchanged between her and Guinevere. But it told her more than the taunt she got.

"You're mad! Stark mad!"

"Quite likely," she retorted, with a cheerful grin, "but there's method in my madness, all the same. As, for example"—and she waggled an accusing finger—"what were the twin aunt and its shadow doing in the bus? Ha! ha!"

"Twin aunt!"

"Shadow!"

"Bus!"

What *was* Pepita getting at now?

From all round came the echoed queries, followed by bursts of laughter, that gave Guinevere and Kathleen ample time to cultivate a blankness of expression that won secret admiration from Pepita.

"One to them!" she said to herself, as she confidently awaited a return thrust.

It touched no guilty conscience, however, when it came. Pepita's clear glance was as free from guile or secret understanding as a kitten's when fresh stares followed Guinevere's enigmatical question.

"And what was the clown, or its double, doing in the Hippodrome?"

But though Pepita's shrewdness told her that she had 'scored a bull's eye', Guinevere could make no such boast. Pepita just eyed her for a moment, in comic amaze, then tapped her forehead menacingly, as she turned a whimsical look on the other girls.

"Potty! Quite potty! *Feather*-brained, eh what?"

Renewed laughter testified to a general recollection of the feathering incident, but to the surprise of everybody the victim of it displayed none of the resentment she usually showed at an allusion to it. In fact, she flashed a smile at Pepita over her shoulder as she hopped after Kathleen and a couple of other cronies, into a taxi.

That smile was the subject of amused comment, however, among the squash of girls who crowded into another with Pepita and Jill.

"Treacle seems to have worked wonders, after all, Pep!" cried one grinning Sixite.

"Look to your laurels, Pepper," laughed a second. "Vere's been thinking herself over and deciding that paddies don't pay. She's going to try being angelic and getting under your guard with a halo stunt."

Pepita's acknowledgment of these little pleasantries was a momentary closing of one wicked eye and the chanting of the last line of a well-known limerick:

"And a smile on the face of the tiger."

"Ha!" Jill's reception of it was one of intense satisfaction. "I knew she wouldn't catch *you* napping, Pep, old thing. Something up her sleeve, eh? What *was* she driving at with her clown-and-Hippodrome claptraps?"

Pepita laughed airily. "Haven't the haziest notion,

my dear. But she and Kath knew what *I* was driving at all right, *re* the twin-aunt-and-bus ditto. When I go home next I must do a little detective work to see if I can find out what their masquerading meant. Meanwhile, let's be merry, for to-morrow we work"; and in another half-minute she had her chums going strongly in a part song, the admirable sentiments of which bade them all be blithe and jolly, banish care and melancholy.

But Guinevere treated in no such careless fashion the things that were puzzling *her*. Her detective work was already proceeding. She found an opportunity that very evening of talking over with Kathleen her plan of action and the matter that so far nonplussed them both.

It was the latter subject that first engrossed them, and not unnaturally, considering that it had been the uppermost thought in their minds since the morning's meeting with Pepita.

"I seemed to draw a complete blank over the Hippodrome mention," was Guinevere's rather irritable commencement of the conversation. "'Gypsy' didn't turn a hair."

"Humph!" grunted Kathleen. "We played innocence pretty well ourselves, I'm thinking, considering the number of eyes on us. But I was afraid she'd pierce our motley. It was unlucky for us that she and Jill happened to be at that crossroads, just where

the bus was going slowly. Pep *must* be wondering what upon earth we were doing, got up as we were, within a quarter of a mile of her very gates."

"Let's hope she'll *stop* at the wondering," Guinevere responded sourly. "It will be awkward if Venus begins asking questions. We could explain a bus ride, but the borrowed plumes wouldn't be such an easy matter."

"You can make your mind easy if you're thinking she'll hear anything through Pep," Kathleen hastened to say. "You two may be at daggers drawn, but she'd never give you away, all the same."

Guinevere accepted this assurance in silence. Deep down in her heart she knew Pepita to be incapable of a sneaking action, but dislike of her rival would not let her acknowledge it openly.

"Well, we didn't get much information at Linden for our pains," she went on, "and that in itself has made things all the more mysterious, in my opinion. Why should the village people have been so snubbing if there wasn't something to hide? That woman in the post office was awful; I could cheerfully have crowned her with the inkpot."

Kathleen broke into a laugh. With less self-importance than Guinevere, she saw the funny side of their hasty exit, with flaming cheeks, upon being told with country candour that inquiries about other folks' business should be made of those folks them-

selves; post office officials weren't a *Who's Who* or *Debrett*.

"I felt like a dog with its tail between its legs," she chucklingly confessed.

"And *I* felt too furious for words," Guinevere continued. "But I've realized since that we ought to have gone to work more warily—our excitement made us too obviously inquisitive. However, I've remedied that mistake already, I hope. That little under-housemaid, Mary, at Aunt Anne's, belongs to a village only a few miles from Linden, and I've tipped her to do a bit of ferreting. She's going to write to me if she finds out anything."

"Well, I hope she soon will!" cried Kathleen. "I'm nearly eaten up by curiosity over that Hippodrome business; I never knew of anything so astounding and puzzling; there won't be anything left of me if *that* mystery isn't soon solved. I simply *can't* forget it."

Guinevere was gazing abstractedly into space, seemingly not listening to her companion. But that the words *had* reached her consciousness was soon implied.

"It's a mystery that has *got* to be unravelled," she said, slowly and thoughtfully. "I suppose, Kath, you've never known a person who is two persons?"

Kathleen's jaw dropped; for a moment or so she

looked staggered, but a suddenly dawning comprehension made her squeal excitedly.

"Oh—h—h—h! I know what you mean, Vere. Somebody who's him- or herself one day and someone quite different on another—a what's-its-name—a dual personality—that's it! But, heavens, no! I've never met anyone like that to my knowledge. Have you?"

"No, but I'm wondering," Guinevere's pondering voice resumed, "if that could possibly be an explanation of the Hippodrome affair."

"Pepita?" Kathleen's eyes were wide and startled-looking. "What a horribly uncanny idea —enough to give one the creeps."

The other shrugged. "*She* can do that with her eyes sometimes; they're black as jet, and like deep pools—dark and mysterious. I'm sure there's something of the gypsy about her, the real Romany type. Kind of gypsy aristocrat, don't you know? Can't you connect that idea with—the Hippodrome?"

Her tone was full of a meaning that soon filtered into the brain of her listener.

"The—the show? Circus stunt and all that?" Kathleen stammered. "Why—of course—I see that, Vere—but—you mean perhaps Pep's a schoolgirl at one time and a gypsy dancer in the Hippodrome at another. My gracious, though, I can't swallow that idea; it's too fantastic, too weird altogether!"

"Not more so than she is herself," was Guinevere's stubborn reply; whether she gave any credit to her own wild theory or not, she was bent on sowing the seed of discomfort in her companion's mind, sure that it would grow and spread to others in a very short time.

To set most of the girls whispering amongst themselves a tale that would make them look askance at Pepita, bade fair to weaken the favourite's popularity, because, as Guinevere was clever enough to realize, girls were apt to fight shy of a schoolfellow about whom there was something too far beyond their comprehension.

"I don't pretend to understand this dual personality stunt," she continued, after a moment, "but I've read stories about it which made it seem a possible thing. Anyhow, it would account for what made us hardly able to believe our own eyes on Saturday afternoon. And—d'you remember all that stuff Pepita was telling you on the first day of term—of her Grandmother's fidgets about her. I overheard every word of her gabble while I was sitting quietly in my cubie. Well, it *might* account for that too. Perhaps Lady Denning *knows* what *we* only suspect. Perhaps the villagers know, and that's the reason for the snubbing they gave us; of course, it's a thing Lady Denning wouldn't want talked about; one of her granddaughter's selves might do something really

awful that the other self would know simply nothing about, although other people *would*."

But the concluding involved sentences found Kathleen with her hands over her ears.

"Oh, Vere, for goodness' sake stop!" she cried frantically. "My head is in a perfect whirl; you're being downright eerie; you'll be saying that Pep is a changeling or a witch next."

Guinevere smiled darkly, and waited for her friend's ears to be free again.

Then she said ominously: "She might be *anything*, as perhaps you'll soon discover. Just wait till my secret service agent gets on the job! I've made Mary thoroughly curious, so I'm *quite* expecting results."

This talk, and the impression it made upon Kathleen and other of the more imaginative girls of Redlands, was not long in bringing about the element of suspicion which Guinevere had bargained for—if not to the extent for which she had hoped, at least to a degree that became apparent to the victim of the tale and her chum.

The matter-of-fact type to whom Kathleen confided the Hippodrome mystery scoffed at the idea of Pepita being likened to a dancing gypsy, and ridiculed even more the dual personality suggestion; but in spite of one laughing remark, that "Pep has a dozen selves, all as different as chalk from cheese", and another comment, tinged with acidity, to the effect

that Vere Castleton's temper had affected her brain, some curiosity lingered, even in those minds.

So it came about that Pepita sought out her chum one day, with a look of comic bewilderment on her face.

"I say, Jill," she began, "d'you notice anything queer about me lately? Have I developed a squint, knock-knees, bowed-legs, or pigeon-toes? Do I look like murder, madness, mumps or any other megrims? If so, break it gently to me, *please*."

Jill shut her book with a bang, as her friend plumped down beside her. Moved to mirth, her laughter yet had a half-rueful sound.

"So you've noticed?" she said, more in confirmation than questioning.

"Noticed!" echoed Pepita explosively. "If you mean have I noticed girls goggling and grinning at me, and quite evidently chewing me over on the Q.T. as if I were some new specimen out of the Ark, you're right. I jolly well *have*. What does it mean? I'm no thin-skin, as you know. Anybody can laugh at me who likes to, only *I* want to be *in* the joke—to know what it's about, and so on."

"Haven't you asked? *I* have," responded her friend.

Pepita nodded vigorously. "And only got sniggers for my pains; might as well have kept my mouth shut. What luck did *you* have?"

"Same as yours."

"Can you make head or tail of it?" Pepita's eyes glinted expectantly as she put the query.

"No," responded Jill, "but that Vere Castleton is at the bottom of it."

"What makes you think so?"

Jill's answer was significant. "The smile on the face of the tiger—or rather, tigress; she's tremendously pleased with herself, and at your expense, I'm *sure*. I've caught her looking at you in a kind of slyly triumphant way. She's been up to something."

"Ho! Undermining, eh?" cried Pepita defiantly. "Then it's up to me to get up to something too. But we'll play a lone-hand game this time, mind. If the other girls are going to be funny with me I'll be funny with them. Wait! An idea is hatching." And Pepita's usual wicked smile began to play at the corners of her mouth.

Jill returned to her book, for the time being quite content to await her friend's pleasure.

Presently an alert "See here, old girl," gained her undivided attention once more, and Pepita outlined rapidly: "The girls, even our set, are puzzling me at present with all their goggling and giggling, so now I'll puzzle some of *them*, and make them a laughing-stock into the bargain, S'vere included. That picnic-party she's having on the sands on Saturday shall pay for a nice little tuck-in for you and me. She's

called me gypsy often enough, so I'll *be* a gypsy and tell fortunes for silver—even copper won't be despised. You know I can act when I like, and I've had a lesson lately from that woman who turned up at Gran's when we were there. If I don't cheat those girls into thinking me a real gypsy, even though I do look like Pep Malcolm at the same time, I'll eat my hat.

"Between now and Saturday you just give out, when you can do it casually, that you and I are going to Blake's Cove for *our* picnic; we *shall* be—when I've wrung the wherewithal for it out of Vere's party. Those caravanners who hang about here so much are camping near the cliffs now, so they'll give colour to me without knowing it. If everything goes as I want it to, it'll be a rather good joke. You just hide somewhere handy, so that you can say afterwards 'I know all', and help spread the tale of how I diddled the party. Twenty or so girls *ought* to average threepence apiece—quite enough for a respectable feed for you and me."

"You'll *never* be able to think of enough fortunes to tell," laughed Jill, though she had every confidence in the trickster's ability to spoof anyone she chose to.

"Oh, won't I!" was the triumphant crow she received in reply. "You leave it to me."

She was bound to admit, when Saturday came, that Pepita had ample justification for her boast that

she would mystify the picnic-party. Got up in a very full, ankle-length cotton skirt and coloured shawl, borrowed from one of the old villagers near Redlands, with an ancient red hat crushed down over her curls, face and hands cleverly treated with a sun-tan 'make-up', she looked a typical specimen of gypsyhood.

In the deep cliff recess where the transformation had taken place, Jill held up a vanity-bag mirror before her chum.

"Behold!" she cried jubilantly. "You're great, Pep, absolutely great! Gypsy to a T, and yet—well!—Pep Malcolm's double. *Don't* look at me with that fawning expression, or I shall double too—double *up*," she added, beginning to shake with mirth as Pepita's face and professional whine enhanced the general effect.

A few minutes later Jill was lying flat on a rocky ledge, just above Guinevere's picnic party, cautiously watching the slouching trudge of the gypsy girl towards it, a basket of ferns for sale slung over one arm.

"Buy a fern, missies. Help a poor gypsy!"

Engrossed in the pleasant task of putting the finishing touches to the feast financed by Guinevere, the knot of buzzing girls kneeling on the sands had not noticed the speaker's noiseless approach from behind a big rock, so heads went round quickly at the sound of the roughly-pleading accents. But feet found

themselves even more quickly, and a moment later the picnickers all stood gazing in stupefaction, so like a group of foolish sheep startled by the advent of a stranger that only an actress of Pepita's attainments could possibly have kept a straight face. But the one she showed them was a masterpiece of dissembling.

They looked upon a girl who reminded them of Pepita and yet was *not* Pepita; or so they thought; and even as that thought flashed, there came tumbling sharply upon it the queer tale that had been whispered about the leader of Dormie Six. Instinctively many dazed glances were turned on Guinevere and Kathleen, and there were backward movements that left a clear field for action to that pair.

Neither had time to speak, however, before the harsh gypsy whine came again.

"Buy a fern for y'r gardens, missies. On'y tuppence each."

Guinevere's eyes, searching—dissecting—as only orbs of their clear steeliness can be—were trained unwaveringly on the shawl-clad figure before her. For a whole silent minute she stood thus, and then Pepita, past-mistress of acting, had the secret satisfaction of seeing undoubted bewilderment dawn on her rival's face. Swift to follow up her advantage, she dragged her roughly-shod feet near enough to peer up cunningly at it.

"Tell y'r fortune, lady!" she cried. "Cross the

gypsy's hand wi' a bit o' silver an' she'll tell 'ee true."

It was then that Guinevere made a sudden venture that might have proved successful against a less clever impersonator.

"If you think you can deceive me with your fooling, Pep Malcolm, you're just mistaken," she said, with a short, sarcastic laugh. "You aren't the sort who can be easily disguised, but I *must* say the get-up *suits* you well enough."

Slowly Pepita let her great black eyes widen in an amazed stare, her mouth fall open, her expression become one of vacant puzzlement. Then, as she took in the effect, she stretched out a grimy paw and laid it on the fastidious Guinevere's arm.

"Jes' a li'l bit o' silver, lady!" she begged persistently.

Guinevere started back, shaking off the touch as though it had been a beetle crawling upon her.

"Go away!" she cried sharply. "I—I haven't any silver."

Pepita followed.

"A copper, then, lady. Spare a copper f'r a poor gypsy."

Guinevere stamped ere she moved back farther. "No! Be off, I tell you."

Pepita advanced, grubby hand no longer soliciting, but rolled into a fist which she shook defiantly.

"Huh, call y'rself a lady," she bawled, "and wun't spare a poor gypsy a copper. I'll tell 'ee y'r fortune f'r nuthin' then, an' a bad 'un it'll be. Ugh! Y'r pretty faace hides an ugly heart. . . ."

"Come away for a bit," Guinevere muttered to Kathleen, under cover of the abuse. "She'll soon get tired of it and go"; and with the feeling of uncanniness that had suddenly sprung up, gaining rapidly on her, she led the way with what dignity she could muster towards a cave that yawned in the cliff face, a little way off, followed by a sheepish trail of girls whose state between utter bewilderment and laughter had driven all thoughts of the feast out of their heads for the time being.

They, in turn, were followed by Pepita's tirade, but not by Pepita herself. She watched them round a rock, then, with lightning movements, having gathered up the four corners of the dainty cloth upon which the picnic repast was spread, she bolted with the lot.

Meantime, in the rather eerie light of the cave, Guinevere was facing her party.

"*Now* laugh at my idea about Pepita Malcolm, if you *can*!" she cried dramatically.

But, looking on her strangely-disturbed face, nobody could then; so she went on, half hysterically it seemed to her hearers.

"Of all the uncanny affairs! Did you ever *see*

such acting and bravado—if it *was* Pepita, and if it wasn't . . . yet it must have been—it couldn't have been anyone else, with that face; as I've acknowledged before, little as I like it or her—it's so arresting. Girls, what *do* you think about it all? Frankly, *I'm* flummoxed."

"I *believe* she's the same that we saw in the Hippodrome," Kathleen eagerly began, then tailed off undecidedly, with: "and yet, I don't know. . . ."

After that, for quite a quarter of an hour, babel was the only word that could be correctly said to describe the medley of tongues that haggled and argued in the cave, till their owners were as mixed in their opinions about Pepita, the gypsy, dual personality, and whether they had all been tricked or not, as were the tongues round the Tower of Babel itself.

But what schoolgirl tongues said when the feast was suddenly remembered, and then found to be missing, must be left to fertile imaginations, with the mention of just one fact—that they did not clear up the mystery.

Pepita, panting up a cliff track with her booty, came upon Jill, also ascending, but with a gait reminiscent of a sailor's roll; only Jill's rolling was caused by a convulsive laughter all the more leg-weakening because it had to be kept within bounds as to sound.

"Oh—h—h, P—Pep, you n—nib!" she splut-

tered, between bursts, as the star of the gypsy comedy caught up with her. "Gug-gug—Greek has met gug—gug—Greek again, my goo—goodness, yes! But the odds aren't even this time."

"I should jolly well say *not*," agreed Pepita, swinging her 'stolen sweets' suggestively. "What a get-away, wasn't it? I was determined to have *something* for my trouble if I couldn't wheedle cash. And this will save us the fag of shopping; we can make straight for the cove right away."

"The w—way they all m—melted, leaving you alone with the spread!" stuttered Jill, rolling afresh.

Pepita's face, alight with mischief, flashed round to her chum.

"Yes, killing, wasn't it? I fairly routed them. Why, Jill, they bolted really, though not at the rate I did with the tuck! What beats me is they seemed half afraid of me. S'vere looked positively pale and shrinking just before she skidaddled. But—why, Jill? Why? A gypsy isn't a leper!"

But Jill, between her laughter and breathlessness from the steep climb, was incapable of further speech at the moment, and could only shake her head. So restless Pepita surged on, triumphant, yet still puzzled.

She cleared the top of the cliff about twenty yards ahead of her chum, to stand fanning her hot face with her hat, as she grinningly watched Jill's snail-like progress.

Suddenly, just as the laggard's head reached level ground, a voice behind Pepita, and evidently directed at her, cried out :

"I say, dear, what *are* you doing in that rig-out, here of *all* places ?"

Pepita swung about, to gaze, with the equally startled Jill, at a tall man whose sea-blue eyes were looking disturbedly out from a deeply-bronzed face. Rather carelessly dressed, and with a coloured neckerchief knotted about his throat, he looked every inch a caravanner, but his voice was pleasant, if worried, and his manner to Pepita could only be described as courtly—after one strange minute. For that space of time he stood staring in an aghast way, as if he were looking at a ghost, into the bewildered face she had turned upon him, then, backing hastily, he lifted his cap, showing hair so white as to look quite extraordinary above his still comparatively young features.

"Oh, I—I *beg* your pardon, young lady," he stammered breathlessly, and in what struck both girls as a panicky tone. "With your back to me I thought you were—someone else."

With that, and the slightest of bows, he flung round on his heels and strode off at a great pace in the direction of a caravan some distance away along the grassy cliff-top.

"Well !" ejaculated Pepita.

"Well!" echoed Jill, and nothing else escaped the lips of either till they had watched the striding figure take the steps of the caravan at a bound and disappear inside it. Then a spell seemed lifted off them, and they turned quite solemn glances upon each other.

"Did you *ever*?" shrilled Pepita. "*He* was scared of me too! He absolutely cleared off like the girls did just now. Jill, what *is* there queer about me? Quick! There *must* be *something*! Am I bewitched, or what?" And Pepita's fingers stroked her puckered forehead distractedly, creating a havoc of the make-up that would have sent Jill into fits at any less absorbed moment.

Now she merely poured out questions in her turn and in a gabble that was barely understandable.

"Why did he call you 'my dear' when he thought you were a 'someone else'? Why should he 'my dear' a gypsy when he doesn't really look or sound like a gypsy himself? Who did he mistake you for? And why did he look so flabbergasted when he found you weren't his 'my dear'? And why——"

But Pepita was flapping her hands as a worried hen does its wings.

"Oh, *wait* a minute, Jill!" she squeaked. "Let *me* have a turn. Why did he take off his cap and bow to a gypsy? And why, if he thought I was a gypsy, should he have called me 'young lady'? Doesn't

that mean he knows I'm *not*? And, Jill, I've seen him before! Where?"

"Ah!" flashed Jill. "So *you* feel that too! Well, it couldn't have been here, because we've never caught a near enough glimpse of the caravanners; you know how mysterious they've always been. Still, I knew I'd seen him somewhere before. But if we had, Pep, surely we should remember where; he's very uncommon-looking, with that white hair, because he doesn't look a scrap oldish, though sort of—sad."

Here Pepita silenced her with a desperate gesture.

"Quickly!" she cried. "Come away to the cove and EAT, before our brains get turned. A feed is the only thing that will save mine. I've a stock for about twenty here. If we eat it all we won't have a chance to worry about any other mysteries in this world"; and after one last long gaze towards the distant caravan, the pair carried tuck and teasing topics to the cove.

A little while afterwards Guinevere and Kathleen set out villagewards to buy the rather meagre replacement of the stolen fare, that only a hurried collection of stray coins amongst the party made possible.

To save time, the couple raced along the sands till an incoming tide round a headland forced them up its cliffs, to find themselves within a stone's throw of the superior-looking caravan whose occasional appearances in the neighbourhood were a source of some

curiosity to the Redlands girls, on account of the oyster-like habits of its occupants, who had never been seen by them at close quarters.

But now Kathleen gave a thrilled gasp and a sudden nudge to her companion; the next instant two pairs of eyes were peering cautiously from behind a big boulder at a figure standing in the doorway of the van, looking thoughtfully seawards.

For a long, tense minute the eyes watched, growing wider with surprise every second. Then each pair met involuntarily, and Guinevere muttered dazedly:

"Phut goes my dual personality idea! Kath, what *can* it all mean? The mystery deepens."

Kathleen nodded. "But it *must* have been Pep on the sands—it *must* have! There couldn't be—*three*!" was her low-toned response.

Guinevere shrugged helplessly. "Goodness knows—*I* don't. I shall soon think we're the victims of delusion if this goes on. I say, let's pass in front of the van for a nearer squint!"

But hardly had the two girls emerged from their vantage place before the figure had hastily withdrawn inside the van and closed both the lower *and* upper part of its door.

The incidents of the afternoon were still proving the chief topic of conversation among Guinevere's picnic-party when, along the sands from the direction

of Blake's Cove—about a mile and a half away—sauntered the homecoming Pepita and Jill.

"Ho, ho!" chuckled the former presently, "the clan has moved camp; perhaps they decided that their chosen spot was bewitched after the disappearance of all their tuck. Look, there they are, pow-wowing just below where the caravan is! Let's go and ask them how the picnic went."

"Don't depend on me to keep a straight face," Jill warned.

"You needn't try; *I* shan't," was Pepita's careless rejoinder. "Just be careful to give nothing away, that's all. I've quite decided to do that—just to go on letting *them* puzzle as they're making *me* puzzle. *What* a game it all is."

"Ours absolutely at present," laughed Jill, "with a cache of food awaiting removal at the first opportunity."

"Yes, I was afraid we shouldn't be able to polish it all off at one go," Pepita said regretfully. "But we've left the things that will keep best, and we'll manage somehow to pay a visit to the store when we're out for our walk to-morrow afternoon."

"I say," Jill exclaimed suddenly, as they were nearing Guinevere's group, "d'you see that girl peering at something from the top of the cliff? She's the third I've watched clamber up and do the same thing. What's on, I wonder?"

"Peering cautiously from behind a big boulder."

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"Heavens!" groaned Pepita. "Don't start any more wonderings and mysteries."

But for all that her gaze was rapier-keen on the party as, a minute or two later, she greeted its members with a cheerful:

"Hail, friends! And what of the day?"

"What, indeed?" was the baleful retort of Guinevere, who had been watching the approach of her *bête noire* under a frown of increasing blackness.

"Humph! Thunder in the air!" Pepita wore her most tantalizing expression as she spoke. "Never mind, Jill, we'll take a pew in the congregation and wait till the clouds roll by."

"We don't want you here," Guinevere snapped. "Move on!"

Aware, from the glances upon her, that she had her schoolfellows as thoroughly puzzled as they had ever been in their lives, Pepita secretly hugged herself, and airily riposted:

"Not us! We've turned up for the bathing. I'm surprised at you, S'vere, trying to incite two well-behaved schoolmates to break the 'safety in numbers' rule. You know we're only allowed to bathe in herds."

Furiously, Guinevere realized her impotence against Pepita in argument. Seething with the rage she was now finding it more and more difficult to control, she sat for a moment or two biting her lip viciously.

Then, springing up from her circle of companions, she flung out the challenge born of her sudden determination to make another stand for supremacy over her rival.

"Very well, Pep Malcolm!" she cried, her voice vibrating with anger; "but you and I will do a bit more than mere bathing to-day, please. The odds aren't even enough for *my* fancy—at present—so I dare you to a swimming race, out to the Gull Rock and back, the loser to confess herself beaten—on all scores."

On all scores! The significant words were well understood by every listener. But what not one of the girls who watched the passage-at-arms could see ever happening was the hauling down of the flag of pride by either rival. Fascinatedly they awaited the reply to the challenge. It was sharp enough in coming.

"Done!" cried Pepita, her head high.

But it was followed by a swift remonstrance from Jill.

"No, no, Pep, you mustn't!" she shrilled. "You know you're no good for a long swim!"

For a moment Pepita hesitated, gaze flashing between her chum and her rival.

But "I dare you!" came tauntingly from the latter, and Pepita hesitated no longer. Rather than plead for excuse the cramp seizures to which she was

liable in the water and which she had forgotten in the excitement of the moment, she would have died on the spot.

"Done !" she repeated stubbornly.

"Good !" said Guinevere. "I thought for a moment you might be funking," and, turning about, she snatched up bathing-dress and towel and made purposefully for one of the small caves that the girls used as dressing-rooms.

Soon the struggle was being watched by a capering, clapping, urging crowd of girls whose chief thought at the moment was for the race itself. To a strong swimmer and one untroubled by a tendency to cramp, the Gull Rock was no very formidable distance, and Guinevere made for it with a confidence that Pepita lacked, threatened by that dread stiffening of her muscles at any instant.

That instant came just as the pair, keeping abreast, turned for the return swim from the rock.

Screams of alarm went up from the girls on shore as Pepita's arms were suddenly flung upwards and her head went under water.

"Look out !"

With the shout, a man came hurtling through their ranks to plunge, fully dressed, to the rescue, but before he reached the swimmers, Guinevere was doing her best to support her pain-racked rival, sickeningly alive, all at once, to the unconquerable

daring that had accepted her challenge on such unequal grounds.

"How dared you!" the man stormed fiercely at Guinevere, a few minutes later. "How dared you tempt her to risk her life like that! I heard your voices from up above, only I didn't gather then that there was any dangerous objection to the race."

Truth to tell, Guinevere was feeling a trifle shaken by the event; Pepita's seizure, so far from land, had frightened her, and she was ready to confess that she had gone too far in her vindictiveness. But the stranger's harsh criticism, directed solely at her, drove back her compunction, bringing temper uppermost again. So the face she lifted to him was rebellious.

"Neither did I," she replied curtly. "How was *I* to know she was liable to cramp? She didn't say."

Into the squabble Pepita's voice broke cheerfully, as willing hands rubbed relief into her legs.

"Not likely! To have you crowing over me, Miss Peacock. But you were a good sort to hold me up, all the same. I shall always remember that, though it's still a case of 'as you were', isn't it?"

But in spite of the little applause that went up for her, as Guinevere rather sulkily watched the hasty departure of the white-haired man whose eyes had flamed such strange anger at her, and then turned her attention to the sufferer's ministrants, she felt that the affair had ended in another distinct score for Pepita.

CHAPTER V

HINTS AND HURRICANES

THE swimming contest had had, by common consent, to be considered a draw, an unsatisfactory state of things which every looker-on at Redlands knew would not be allowed by the rivals to continue for any length of time; but what would happen in the long run no one was prepared to hazard, although conjectures were many and various, the most popular of these being that one or other of the 'Greeks' would at last proceed to such an extreme as would result in Venus requesting her removal from the school. From that arose speculation as to who would stand the best chance with Venus of a pardon, and again there were smiles and headshakes over a knotty problem.

Guinevere already ranked high with the Head as a pupil of promise, both in diligence and steady behaviour in class; and Pepita, loser of conduct marks, Idler, with a capital I, except for the present competitive spurt, was yet Pepita the charming; by some freemasonry of feeling the girls fathomed the soft spot for her in the heart of the Principal; they could never imagine her dismissing the sparkling Pepita with cold words and adamant face. So—what

was going to happen ? The question, applied to a couple of girls equally self-willed, equally high-spirited, would have puzzled many older and wiser heads.

The only girl at Redlands who did not puzzle about the future was Pepita herself. As has been said before, she made no effort after popularity ; she led simply because she was a born leader, never troubling herself with whys and wherefores ; so she accepted without any perturbation the fact that she and Guinevere would be at loggerheads 'till the end of the chapter', and that was that.

But it was otherwise with Guinevere. She had all the fret of a racehorse that fears itself in danger of being beaten in the race, and wondered a trifle uneasily in her calmer moments to what lengths that fret would force her, knowing full well that her proud neck would never bear any yoke of Pepita's. Her great idea was to shake her rival's sublime self-assurance, and in the hope that the solving of what promised to prove a mystery would accomplish the desired effect, she bent all her endeavours to the task, spurred on by the tormenting mystification which now held her and her picnic-party in closer and closer thrall.

For by neither sign nor sound did Pepita or Jill betray any knowledge of the former's plundering of the picnickers' camp ; also, to the intense aggravation

of the girls, who had listened, dumbfounded, to their hostess's rejection of the dual personality idea, not a single glimpse of the caravan's mistress had rewarded their constant spying on that eventful afternoon; and a subsequent report from the Crows' Nest by one of their number that the caravanners had since been seen moving on, destroyed hopes of any further quizzing, at any rate until they reappeared in the neighbourhood. So curiosity foiled quickly became curiosity rampant, and Guinevere was urged on to the probing of the problem.

Her sleuthing gained its first definite result very shortly after the picnic fiasco. With elated face and bearing she bore down on Kathleen in the playing-field one afternoon.

"A word in your ear, comrade," she muttered; and when Kathleen, made inquisitive by her tone and look, drew aside, eager for confidences, she inquired rapidly:

"Aren't there buses running from here to a place called Culverdeep?"

"Yes. One goes every hour; it's a ten-mile ride; jolly little fishing village. Why do you want to know?" cried Kathleen, interestedly wondering if any worthwhile illicit jaunt was to be proposed.

"Because—you remember Mary, Aunt Anne's maid? Well, she's going there soon for her holiday, and she asks if she and I can meet, either here or there,

some time. I've just had this letter from her; read it, and you'll soon tumble. She makes a capital 'tec' —cautious as can be."

With a careful taking-in of every word, Kathleen read:

Dear Miss,

I have found out quite a bit, but it would be plainer told than written down, so, as I am going for my fortnight's holiday on Saturday morning to Culverdeep, not far from where your school is, perhaps you can arrange about our meeting some time, either near the school or at Culverdeep, where I shall be staying with my uncle, who is a coastguard. I enclose the address.

Yours respectfully,

Mary Cross.

With Guinevere's inquiry in mind, Kathleen lifted her eyes from the letter.

"It'll be Culverdeep, of course," she said. "You won't try to meet her here."

Guinevere shook her head decisively.

"Too risky. A dozen things might upset any arrangement I made. In any case, it wouldn't be wise; supposing one of the mistresses saw me hob-nobbing with a strange girl, or it got to their ears in any way, there would be no end to the tiresome questions. Besides, why shouldn't you and I have the

fun of a bus trip if we can manage it? You *would* go with me, wouldn't you, Kath?"

"Only give me the chance!" was her friend's hearty response. "Let's see, to-day is Tuesday, so there will be just time to fix it for Saturday afternoon if you write at once. We can start off along the sands in good time as though we're going to walk to Storm Head, as we often do, then dodge up Smugglers' Gap to the road, so that a bus can pick us up well away from school optics."

"Capital!" praised Guinevere. "We'll leave our hats in a cave on the way, so that we won't be too noticeable in Culverdeep. Then we can make a joy jaunt of it—have a ripping tea somewhere to make up for last Sat.'s upset. I shall never rest till I get to the bottom of it all. I'll get a line written to Mary directly after tea, and slip out to the letter-box with it before prep, if you'll cover my tracks. I *do* wonder what tale that girl has to tell."

It proved a tale that caused the two truants from Redlands to think their escapade well worth while. Having successfully carried out their plan on the following Saturday, they were to be found sitting amongst the tarry litter of creels, ropes and nets on the quiet beach at Culverdeep, absorbed listeners of an intelligent-looking girl to whom the handsome Guinevere was plainly an object of great admiration and even affection; for, with all her pride, Guinevere also had

all the patrician charm of manner that wins loyalty and friendship from those in lower station.

"Lor', Miss Vere," Mary was saying, her brown eyes twinkling as she related her experiences, "you'd be that amused as never was if you'd heard all the roundabout talks I've started lately with people I know, to try and get hold of things for you. If I ever get tired of service I shall be a policewoman or a lady detective—it's rare fun, sort of suspecting folks and following up clues about them and their doings. But there, as you haven't much time here I'd better get on with what I did find out. Well, that gypsy dancer you saw at the Hippodrome is the wife of the owner of it."

"Wife?" echoed Guinevere, blankest astonishment in face and tone. "But—Mary! she looks as young as a schoolgirl in the ring, and not *much* older out of it."

"Um—m! She's a wonder," conceded Mary. "I've seen her give her turns lots o' times. Of course the dancing keeps her as spry as a grasshopper, and then there's the make-up," was the shrewd addition.

The listeners sat speechless for a moment or two, digesting this information, but at last Guinevere rapped out:

"I *can't* believe *it*—that she's so grown up, I mean."

"Well, it's true, anyhow, Miss Vere," the little

country girl returned bluntly. "She's a kind of star at the Hippodrome—only gives a turn once or twice a week, but they say that's what keeps the show paying so well. I heard the owner's name is William or Williams, and he and she belonged to a travelling circus before he got that place on his own. Though they still travel, seems to me, because I was told they still live in a caravan and go jogging about—nobody knows exactly where they'll be for two minutes together, 'cept just the times when she's at the show. Then he just hangs round ready to carry her off again —queer lot."

The questing pair had been exchanging knowing glances as Mary proceeded, and when she finished Guinevere burst out again :

"A very queer lot *indeed*, I should say. *We* know where they are pretty often, Mary, as it happens : in the neighbourhood of our school ; goodness knows what for ; but listen with all your ears to this, Mary—only last Saturday Kathleen and I got just a glimpse of the dancer looking out of that caravan, and except that we could see then that she's older, she's the absolute double of the Malcolm girl of whom I told you ; it's a positively remarkable likeness. That's why I wanted to find out who the dancer is."

"Well, you know that much now, anyhow!" Mary assured her, with self-complacency.

Guinevere sat with knitted brows.

"It seems only to make everything more puzzling, though," she cried slowly. "*Why* should a Malcolm of Denning Abbey be the living image of a gypsy?"

"I should say because she *is* a gypsy and not a Malcolm," was Mary's practical answer, and then, leaning forward, she added impressively: "Just listen, Miss Vere, to something else I found out through a girl I used to go to school with, who's in a place at Linden," and with many nods of her head as she rattled out a trail of excited sentences, Mary retailed some information that set her two hearers agape and rigid with amaze.

With Mary squatting back on her heels, eyeing them triumphantly when she had finished, they gazed at each other spellbound, horrified dismay growing on Kathleen's face, satisfaction dawning on Guinevere's.

"Oh, it *can't* be! It *can't* be!" the former cried in a choked voice at last. "Pep a foundling! Pep not Lady Denning's granddaughter! I should hate to think *that* was true. Poor old Pep! It would be *awful*."

For a matter of moments Guinevere had no reply to make to this outburst. From underneath her thrill at this discovery to her rival's disadvantage, better feelings were trying to thrust through: regret for having been the means of turning out a skeleton from the Malcolm cupboard, pity for a girl whose confidence in, and love for, stately home and lineage

were being threatened by the earthquake of cruel revelations. She tried to fancy herself in the same position, faced by just such sudden bitter knowledge, and shivered at the thought. Hard upon it, however, came recollections of Pepita's arrogant attitude towards her. Never had she been able to find a weapon against it until now. That thought steeled her heart. Why should she spare a rival who so mercilessly followed up every advantage?

So Guinevere's firm jaw went up, and her gaze was rather supercilious on her chum as she replied:

"Pooh! She's probably known about it for ages, and simply kept it dark. She's brazen enough for anything. Didn't I always *say* she was gypsyish? Of *course* it's true; I'm not in the least surprised now, though just at first it *was* a bit flabbergasting to think of oneself at school with a gypsy."

"Oh, but, Vere"—Kathleen's tone was indignantly protesting—"be fair; you *must* own that Pep *can't* be an ordinary sort of—of—gypsy, anyhow."

Guinevere shrugged. "Neither is her facsimile," she retorted dryly; "in fact, she's very extra-ordinary looking. I'm quite ready to admit that, but it doesn't alter *facts*."

Into an argument that promised to grow heated, Mary's voice broke a little anxiously.

"I say, Miss Vere," she urged, "you'd better not let out to anyone else the things I've been telling you·

I don't believe the—the—Miss Pepita girl knows about being a foundling, because my friend says that Lady Denning asked years ago that it shouldn't be referred to, and she's such a sweet sort of lady that the Linden people mostly keep their tongues still. I don't quite know how Nelly was clever enough to get one to wag—just plain artfulness I suppose. She pumped an old grannie, she said—some old dear who forgets what Lady Denning asked, I expect. And everybody in Linden, Nelly says, loves this Miss Pepita, every bit as much as if she really belonged to the Abbey, so there'd be a tidy to-do if it was found out that anyone had been chattering. It might mean Nelly losing her place and character if it came out she'd been ferreting out things, and s'posing the mistress got to hear what I've been doing in it. *Do* be careful, Miss Vere."

The imperious creature she addressed jumped up with sudden impatience.

"Oh, that will be all right, Mary. No one will hear anything about you or your friend," she cried loftily. "You've both helped me quite a lot and I'll send you each a present when my next pocket-money comes along. All you've got to do is to mind your own business from now onwards and leave me to mind mine. I hope you'll have a jolly holiday. Come along, Kath, we've a tea to get, and time, tides and buses wait for no man."

So Mary was left on the beach, feeling like the sponge that has been squeezed dry, and wondering somewhat uneasily just what sort of use Miss Vere intended to make of the information she had received.

There was no doubt at all upon that point in the mind of that young lady herself. In a fever to be back at Redlands, she hurried through a delightful cottage arbour tea in a fashion secretly resented by Kathleen, who, to tell the truth, was more keen on making the most of a half-holiday treat than on trying to score off Pepita.

But, as usually happens, force of character carried all before it, and as Guinevere was also 'paying the piper', Kathleen had to curb a tendency to linger lovingly over raspberries and cream, and jump, still munching a delectable home-made cake, at marching orders.

"Let's make a move," Guinevere said restlessly. "I can't contain myself sitting still with all Mary's news in my mind. We'll eat the biscuits as we walk to the bus road."

But half-way along the mile or so of quiet lane that led to the highway, adventure overtook them.

"Gracious!" shrilled Kathleen suddenly, and the chattering pair shot round to look behind them, startled by the sound of galloping hooves.

Towards them, not at any breakneck speed, but quite obviously running away, none the less, came a

big brown horse drawing a caravan, which seemed, probably because caravans are always associated with gentle jogging, to be swaying alarmingly.

"I believe it's THE caravanner's turnout!" gasped Guinevere, after an instant's stare at the oncoming vehicle and its steed. "I've never seen another picked out in blue and white like it, and *surely* that's their gentle old nag."

"Gentle!" squealed Kathleen. "Why, he's bolting!" and she prepared to follow suit—into the hedge—like a frightened rabbit.

"Nonsense! Come back," shouted Guinevere after her. "He's got his head for once and is having a frisk, that's all. I'll stop him!" And with arms outspread and a soothing repetition of "Wooa, old boy," she fearlessly stepped out towards the animal.

Fascinatedly, Kathleen watched his gallop drop to a canter, the canter to a walk and then his half-nervous, half-pleased acceptance of Guinevere's caresses and gentle remonstrances when she had gained his bridle and brought him to a standstill. "Naughty old boy!" were the crooning words that reached his twitching ears. "Thought he'd gallivant, did he? Supposing he'd caught his heels in the reins and tumbled down or smashed up the pretty l'il house on wheels! Bad old boy!" And all the while his glossy neck was being patted as if he had done the cleverest thing in the world.

Perhaps Guinevere thought that he had. At any rate, the laughing face she turned on the returned skulker bore an excitement that Kathleen had never seen there before.

"Quick!" she was bidden. "Let's explore the van before anyone comes after him. It's the chance of a lifetime. There's a field-gate just ahead. We'll tie the old chap there for a bit. He can do with a rest. Silly old duffer, to gallop like that at his age."

"I was scared nearly to fits," Kathleen said, while the tying-up process was going on; "there seemed so little room to get out of the way in this lane. I had visions of two mangled bodies lying in the dust. You *were* plucky, Vere!"

"Stuff!" Guinevere laughed. "It's just being used to gee-gees, that's all. I love them. I ride at home, lots. One gets to know their little ways; and I could see this old dear wasn't being really dangerous. Probably he'd just a small scare of some sort. Hurrah! no one in sight as yet, so let's walk into the parlour."

"Look out we're not caught by the spider, then," joked Kathleen, slightly nervous of the proposed invasion, yet every bit as eager as her chum for an inside view of the van they had quizzed so often with curiosity-creating distance between.

"Oh, an eye on the little back window will prevent that," Guinevere decided, and firmly led the prowl.

But the look-out was promptly forgotten in the

chaos they found inside. After one hasty glance around, feminine instinct drove out all but the desire to put a muddle to rights, and the girls flew hither and thither in the pretty little apartment, uttering vexed exclamations over the debris caused by the swinging career that Guinevere had checked.

"Oh, the rascal! the rascal!" she cried, shaking a fist at the now placid animal between dives for scattered and mostly shattered crockery. "Delightful willow pattern too, the wretch! Lucky it's easy to match, but *what* a shame so much is broken!"

"Humph!" grunted Kathleen, groping for silver and cutlery. "Lots more than china *might* have been. Lucky for the owners that the *van's* whole. The whole caboodle might have been smashed to smithereens but for you."

Guinevere smiled at that. "I don't think the old nag would have had the wind to go on long enough for that," she replied. "I'm so awfully glad he didn't come to grief himself. Vans and things can be mended, but it mightn't have been possible to mend *him* if *he'd* been damaged."

"Jolly good job the cupboards are fixtures," Kathleen remarked after a while, "or they would have followed their contents to the floor. Just look at this little conglomeration! Oh-h, my hat!

Her exclamations and pointing finger claimed Guinevere's instant attention; the lifting of a little

heap of table linen had revealed a snapshot album lying open on the floor, the two pages exposed to view displaying the 'snaps' which had provoked Kathleen's surprised ejaculations.

After one sweeping survey of the 'snaps' it was Guinevere's turn to exclaim.

"What in the world!" she cried dazedly. "Redlands, surely! The playing-field! Us girls in a cricket match! Good gracious, Kath, what can be the idea?"

Kathleen was lying flat, absorbedly poring over the album. "There's Pep as plain as a pikestaff at the wicket," she said excitedly. "And there am I bowling; you're amongst the fielders. The other snaps are just as good. Turn over quickly. Why, Pep seems in evidence in every one of——"

The conclusion of her sentence was cut into by the sound of running feet, then a man's imperative voice brought the two girls to their feet, to face the caravan's owner.

Hatless, with his shock of white hair tossed into wild disorder by his sprint from the village, blue eyes bright with searching recognition, the intruders were struck by an antagonistic element in his stare, when a couple of agile springs had landed him in the doorway.

"What are *you* doing at this place and in my van?" he demanded, and there was no mistaking the hostility

of his tone. "For Poll Prying, commend me to schoolgirls!"

Guinevere's face flamed; chagrin at the knowledge that the attempted espionage of the previous Saturday had been noticed, and guilt over that fact made the position not only undignified but exceedingly difficult. But ere she could think of a word to say, the man's gaze had fallen on the open 'snap' album; a couple of steps forward and a flick of the foot closed it, then, picking it up, he shut it inside a cupboard, and flashed on the girls again with an angry gesture of his hand doorwards.

"Get out—and quickly," he ordered harshly, "unless you want a complaint of your presence here to reach your school."

Feeling half choked with rising temper, Guinevere was about to fling haughtily past him when Kathleen interposed. Possibly she had divined that his animosity was unmistakably directed more against Guinevere than against herself. As unmistakable, too, was the fact that, despite his harsh words and the roughness of his manner, here was no common roadster; there was culture in voice and accent, breed in every line of him. So Kathleen bearded him with a show of spirit that surprised and halted her companion-in-disgrace.

"You're being very horrid," she said severely, "when you ought to be very grateful, I should think.

The caravan might have been matchwood by this time if my friend hadn't stopped your runaway horse."

"Huh! A likely story," sneered the caravanner. "You surely don't expect me to swallow that tale, after my experience of your inquisitive habits on the cliffs last Saturday. Oh, I was watching! D'you think I couldn't *guess* that while I happened to be shopping in Culverdeep this afternoon you drove off with the van, meaning to get far enough away to do the ransacking you were bent on. Jerry never ran away in his life. Bunkum!"

Kathleen fairly flared at that. "How *dare* you make such an accusation against us!" she raved. "The horse *had* run away, and Vere did stop him, and we *weren't* ransacking, only just putting the joggled things a bit straight."

"And mightily interested in the job," was the sarcastic retort that showed plainly how little the man believed her.

It brought Guinevere into the wordy fray with a gibe. "If you're so furtive and so suspicious," she said icily, "there must be something in your life to make you so. Why should you suspect people of ransacking your van if you haven't something to hide?"

Something to hide! The man flinched at the unexpected thrust as though at a physical blow, and, swift to follow up what she judged to be a point scored, Guinevere ran on.

"So I advise you to be more careful of what you say. If you make complaints of us at our school, we can easily turn the tables on you. The Head would *soon* be wanting to know why you are always hanging round taking 'snaps' of Redlands and everybody there *ad lib*. You might be a burglar or a kidnapper for all she knew."

Triumphantly aware that the tables were already turned, the two girls mercilessly watched the deepening stain on the man's tanned face. But only for a moment or two did he allow their inquisitive scrutiny. With his blue eyes simply snapping anger, he barked out:

"Get along or I'll put the matter of this rummaging of my property into the hands of the police."

"Who came off best in *that* bout, d'you think?" Kathleen dubiously inquired of her chum, when, having made as dignified an exit from the caravan as they could, they walked onwards to the bus route.

"Hard to say," was Guinevere's rueful reply. "At one time I thought the game was going to be ours, but nobody who was a criminal would be likely to talk of calling in the police."

"Bluff, perhaps," Kathleen suggested. But Guinevere shook her head; her expression was very thoughtful.

"I don't think so. He was mad that we'd seen the 'snaps', and I've a notion that fact took the wind out of his sails for a minute; but for all that

he looked as honest as the day. He seemed a perfect brute, and yet I don't believe he's anything of the kind. Somehow, in spite of that awful scene with him, I—liked him."

Kathleen received this astonishing avowal without any surprise.

"It's funny," she said, "but I felt much the same, even though I was angry enough to throw things at him. He seems so queerly young, except for his white hair, but there's a pathetic look in his face—a kind of lost-dogness; you know what I mean."

Guinevere nodded without speaking, and the walk proceeded in a silence broken at length by dismayed yelps from both girls as they emerged from the lane, only to see their bus disappearing into distance.

"Horrors! My watch has stopped!" cried Guinevere, with that false friend to her ear. "I thought we had *heaps* of time. Now——"

"*Two* hours to wait!" groaned Kathleen, answering the mute inquiry. "Don't you remember we looked up the times of the buses and decided we daren't miss this one; they're not nearly so frequent going back."

"Then we're fairly done for getting back to time," was Guinevere's desperate summing up, "unless we can walk it; but I feel as tired as a dog after the hot and exciting afternoon."

"So do I," Kathleen wailed. Then, suddenly cheering up, she said, "What about following the coast,

though? I know it cuts off quite two miles, and we should have the fresh wind to help us. Come along, I believe there's a path to the cliffs back along the lane a little way."

Which suggestion only resulted, however, in two weary and harassed-looking damsels again coming face to face with the caravanner, now placidly smoking a pipe as he walked beside the jogging Jerry.

Perhaps his attractive, bronzed face, cleared now of temper, inspired Guinevere's sudden resolve. At all events, bitterly against the grain though it was to address him again, she decided that the situation warranted an application for guidance.

"Would you mind telling us if there's a path to the cliffs anywhere along here?" she asked, trying to make her tone quite neutral, but only succeeding in sounding rather forlorn to the man's sensitive ears. "My friend thought there was, but we can't find it."

He shook his head, removing his pipe with one hand and checking Jerry with the other.

"Ploughed up long ago," he replied laconically. "Why? Stranded?"

Evidently he expected the two dejected nods, for he went on quickly, without giving time for speech to follow them.

"H'm! The way of transgressors *is* hard—mostly. Still"—with the slightest pause—"I can't leave two girls in a hole, even though they *are* inquisi-

tive and deserve punishment. I'm going your way; and Jerry can go faster than shanks' pony. Get in!"

The "Get in!" was uttered with nearly as much curtness as the "Get out!" of a while back, and, in spite of tiredness and desperation, Guinevere's pride nearly drove her into a haughty refusal of the much-needed lift.

The caravanner chose to misread her hesitation.

"You'll be quite safe," he asserted grimly. "I'm neither burglar nor kidnapper, as will probably be made plain to you now and again en route." Then, with stern command suddenly in his voice, he added, "Quickly now! You two girls are farther afield than you've any right to be, and I'm going to see you back, so—hop in!"

An odd feeling of shame grew in the hearts of the girls with the miles of that queer, silent journey. For, with the caravanner seated in the doorway driving, neither felt like talking, although significant glances passed between them every time he exchanged one of the many salutations with people they passed on the road; three of the smilingly friendly greetings being from policemen. Whatever his habits, then, and however puzzling they might be to curious schoolgirls, it seemed clear that there was nothing lawless about him. No wonder, Guinevere thought, as her gaze roamed wonderingly from the head of

thick white hair to the slender brown fingers holding the reins, he had so resented her hints that he might be a shady character.

Contrition for those hints urged her to the course she took when she and Kathleen were dropped, at their request, near Smugglers' Gap, so that they could retrieve their hats on the way back to Redlands.

"We're tremendously obliged to you," she said gratefully, determined not to be put off by the frostiness of his blue eyes from having her say. "We'd have got into an awful row if we had been late. Thanks *so* much. Oh, and I—I *wish* you'd believe what we told you—about Jerry running away, and our trying to put the caravan tidy. We *hadn't* rummaged—truly."

Stiffly, quite evidently forcing himself to be polite against his will, the caravanner raised his hand in a farewell salute to the girls he had assisted ; then, as stiffly, "Good evening," he said, and moved on, at his nag's head, leaving a mixture of feelings behind him.

"Disbelieving horror ! Grumpy wretch !" stormed Guinevere to Kathleen as she gazed petulantly after him. "I might as well have saved my breath and my pride. It wasn't exactly easy to eat humble pie after the way he'd browbeaten us. If he's always as curmudgeony, his wife must have a rotten time of it."

"I suppose this is one of her Hippodrome days," Kathleen said, as they turned down the Gap. "Though Mary did say, didn't she, that he's always hung round the show then, ready to carry her off again?"

"Tyrant!" Guinevere viciously pronounced him. "If he hadn't been so cutting just now I *might* have been disposed to let his mysterious affairs alone; as it is, let him beware!"

And she chanced to be still in that quarrelsome frame of mind when she next came face to face with her rival.

The meeting took place in the school grounds about an hour later, and, for a wonder, was a solitary one, for Jill, having found it impossible to tear Pepita from a thrilling book, had been tempted to a final game in the playing-field, and Kathleen, grown a little tired of her companion's silent brooding over the afternoon's discoveries, had left her to it, while she slipped away to the more congenial task of spreading the fresh news.

So Guinevere, sauntering over the grass, engrossed by her mystery, was presently made aware of the proximity of one of its subjects by a mocking voice, warbling suggestively: "Where my Caravan has Rested."

Within a few paces, with her back propped against a tree-trunk, finished book thrown aside, sat Pepita, and Guinevere thought that never had she looked more

elfish, more a creature of woodland wiles, with her curls set a-rioting by the evening breeze, her expressive face eloquent of her relish of teasing.

Instantaneously there flashed upon Guinevere the suspicion that Pepita had been a witness somewhere—somehow—of the caravan ride, and the suspicion was quickly turned into conviction by the impish Pepita.

"The Knight of the Road didn't look as if he'd exactly *enjoyed* the company of the fair maidens," was her grinning addition to the line of ditty.

Guinevere stalked near and stood looking venomously down at her.

"Spy!" she hissed.

Pepita nodded, still grinning. "Took a leaf out of *your* book to-day, S'vere. Smugglers' Gap is *full* of peepholes. Pussycat, pussycat, where have you been?" and the curls were waggled now in mocking reproof.

"That—with reservations—is what I'm going to tell you—*Nil!*"

"Nil? H'm! New name, what?" Pepita's black eyes, narrowed with amused questioning, searched half idly the steely ones bent on her with such a peculiarly gloating expression.

"Yes, I'm going to call you Nil and Nemo from now on. Nothing and nobody, you know. That's what you *are*. I've been this afternoon where I've

found out just *that*. So perhaps you won't crow quite so loudly in future."

"Nothing and nobody! Found out?" As she echoed the astounding words, Pepita sprang to her feet in one of her cyclonic outbursts, head flung, eyes like live coals, hands clenched. "What do you mean?" she demanded, struck by the utter sureness of the other's tone and manner.

"What I say!" was the taunting retort she got. "You've ruffled it pretty high and mighty here as a Malcolm of Denning Abbey, but you're nothing of the kind. You're just a foundling—a nobody, left on somebody's doorstep. If you don't believe me, ask Lady Denning; ask the people of Linden—they *all know*"; and, satisfied that this time Greek had met Greek to result in a conclusive victory for one, Guinevere flounced away.

Some ten minutes later a wild-looking creature, who had successfully negotiated, unseen, the deserted Dormie Six, and rummaged with shaking fingers for the purse in her locker, dropped over the school wall by way of a branch standing out from the Crows' Nest, and pelted away for dear life into the gathering twilight.

CHAPTER VI

PRIDE HAS A FALL

HALF-PAST eight on that perfect summer evening brought furore to Redlands. Pepita Malcolm was missing! The news came all the more as a thunderbolt because so many of the girls remembered having passed her under the tree with her book. Jill, naturally coming in for special questioning, could only reiterate wonderingly that she had left her chum deep in the story about seven o'clock, but had failed to find her an hour later.

Then, too, a general appeal to the whole school for anything that might give enlightenment as to the truant's whereabouts drew a complete blank, for, as it happened, no one had witnessed the meeting between the rivals, and as yet the new tale regarding Pepita had spread to only a few. So, secure in the knowledge that she would be the very last girl in the school to be credited with having been in the company of Pepita, Guinevere kept a still tongue in her head.

But what she could not keep was an entirely easy mind. Triumph at having at last scored against her rival was robbed of some of its glory by the recollection of the stricken look on Pepita's proud little face; try as she would, argue to herself as she did,

that Pepita deserved all she got, the girl who came of a proud race herself could not shut that expression out from her memory, or entirely quench a niggling uneasiness as to how the exposure of the mystery concerning Pepita might react upon herself. Her hope was either that the girl would persuade Lady Denning to take her away from the school, or, that the leaking-out of the story would result in Miss Vene's requesting her removal from it, and she reckoned upon wounded pride in the first event, and a desire to avoid awkward comment in the second, to bring about the end she desired without any fuss or inquiry.

Her part was quite an easy one to play during the hue and cry that followed Pepita's disappearance; an air of indifference as to her rival's whereabouts, tinged with malicious satisfaction that some escapade would later be exposed, being just the attitude expected of her by her schoolfellows, the fact that she was included in one of the search-parties for her *bête noire* being understood by them as a compulsory measure.

It was given to Jill, distractedly racking her brains for reasons for her chum's mysterious disappearance, while she ran hither and thither along the cliff-tops calling her name, to have the next word with the caravanner.

Sitting smoking on the steps of his caravan, he had been watching rather surprisedly the bevies of schoolgirls chasing about at such an unusually late hour

outside the school grounds. Suddenly, quite near him, sounded a clear, girlish "Coo-ee, Pep! Pep-i-ta! Where are you? Coo-ee! Coo-ee! Coo-ee!"

Absentmindedly dropping the still smoking pipe into a coat pocket, the man rose and moved hastily into view of the running girl.

"Somebody missing?" he inquired. "Anything I can do?"

Surprised by his appearance, and vaguely aware of a queer, strained look on the man's face, Jill stammered out, in answer to his first query:

"Yes, my chum Pepita Malcolm," adding rather tentatively, as she recollected the caravanner's strange manner at their previous meeting, "the girl you mistook for someone else the other day. She was dressed up then, of course, but you would remember her face, I expect."

He nodded, his gaze, sombre but not unfriendly, on his informant.

"But—missing?" he cried, in a concerned tone that set Jill wondering why he should be so put out about a stranger. "Since when?"

"Oh, only an hour or so ago," she returned, and, won by his evident interest, she briefly gave him particulars, adding, "The only explanation I can think of is that she bolted to the village on the sly for something she decided on suddenly, and has had an accident of some sort. Supposing she pelted along the cliffs

and fell over, for instance. Anyhow, we're hunting all along here in case, but I'm hoping she'll turn up whole at any minute."

"Right! I'll climb down and hunt along the bottom of the cliffs," was the caravanner's hurried remark, and with an abrupt movement he turned away to close the door of his wheeled house, but not quickly enough to prevent Jill from noticing a wildness in his blue eyes, and a gritting of his teeth, that filled her with uneasiness.

"I believe he's a bit dotty," she said to herself. "There's something about him that I like, and yet—he's queer"; and that summing-up decided her to keep within hailing distance of her particular search-party.

She would have had cause to suspect his sanity even more could she have watched his further procedure. Like a man possessed he ploughed along the sands beneath the cliffs, stopping often to clamber up them frantically wherever an overhanging ledge suggested a lodgment for anyone who might have rolled from the top, jagging hands and fingers till they bled freely, tearing his clothes, and forever calling, not loudly, but with a plaintive insistence that was almost like a wail, "Pepita! Pepita! Pepita!"

Meanwhile, at Redlands, an anxious conference had been going on between the Principal and capable Miss Giles, the mistress to whom she most frequently turned in emergency.

"If we haven't soon news of the child, I must 'phone the police station, and then get a message through somehow to Lady Denning," Miss Vene said hurriedly at last, fingers already on her table telephone, as though itching to lift its receiver. "I dread the very idea of having to take such a course, but—now—a horrible fear *will* keep creeping into my mind. You remember Lady Denning's letter at the beginning of term, Miss Giles?"

The startled look in the eyes of the under-mistress was affirmative enough without her quiet "Yes", and the Head continued, her face set in lines of extreme gravity, "I dismissed it rather lightly, as you know—a case of fidgets, we *all* thought—now—with this mysterious vanishing of Pepita—I am tortured by the conviction that that letter was inspired by an actual fear—of some such happening. Yet, there's nothing more than that supposition to go upon—nothing definite to help the police if I have to call them in, so Lady Denning will *have* to be communicated with at once, whatever the effect upon her."

"If only she can be spared anxiety!" Miss Giles murmured distressfully. "Idolizing Pepita as she does, the shock will be awful. Perhaps we shall hear something good shortly. Ah!" as the telephone bell burred.

An eager answering, then the Principal's face clouded again, and she replaced the receiver in a distracted way.

"No luck," she said dejectedly. "It was Miss Drew speaking from the public call-box. Pepita hasn't been seen in the village since early this afternoon. Well, I dare not wait any longer. Delays are dangerous," and, with a sigh, she gave the call for the police station.

A little later she sat wording a careful message to Lady Denning, still hoping against hope that it would not need to be despatched, when a sudden clanging of the hall-door bell made her alertly prepare to greet, as she supposed, a police officer.

But it was no man of the law who presently faced her, although his penetrating gaze had a dissecting quality that might well have labelled him 'detective', if the restlessness of his manner had not belied it.

"I hope you will pardon the liberty of this call," he began hurriedly, "but I understand that one of your pupils is missing and have come to offer my services. My name is John Williams, and I know the district thoroughly, through being a caravanner. You have acquainted the police with the disappearance, I hope?"

It was characteristic of Miss Vene's good breeding that she did not allow her astonishment at the stranger's authoritative manner to colour her reception of him.

"About a quarter of an hour ago," she replied with businesslike brevity. "I am expecting our sergeant here any moment, so if you could wait, Mr. Williams,

and offer your services as a searcher to him . . .?"

He nodded as she paused questioningly. "I'd like to," he said, his decided tone a queer contrast to the nervous tension she sensed in him. "You'll find that the police will trust me. I've been about here, off and on, for years. If the girl doesn't turn up, I can beat up a whole crowd of searchers very quickly and scour the neighbourhood."

"Thank you! It's extremely kind of you to offer such assistance," she began.

But he waved her gratitude aside. "Not at all, not at all. Can't have a schoolgirl missing and not offer to help find her," was his abrupt interpolation; and, with equal brusqueness, came his query.

"Any idea *why* she should have vanished in this fashion?"

"Not the faintest," Miss Vene answered, wondering all the time why it was that she could feel no resentment of his commanding attitude towards her, and exactly who had given him comprehensive information regarding Pepita's disappearance.

"You are not aware of any feud against her in the school? Any boycotting or bullying?"

Miss Vene frankly stared for a moment. Such queries applied to the popular Pepita struck her as positively ludicrous; so much so that even her present consuming anxiety could not prevent a slight smile from illuming her face.

"My dear sir," she said, "you are speaking of the most popular girl in the school; a sufficient answer, surely. May I in turn ask what should prompt such questions?"

But for the first time the man evaded her keen glance.

"Oh—I—just wondered, that's all," he responded hastily, "whether she might have *run* away for any reason."

"*Run* away!" The idea was such a shock to Miss Vene that her echoing words were shrill with amaze. Then, too, she felt certain that the visitor had parried her query, and a medley of thoughts flooded her mind. Why *should* he have done so? What could he—a stranger—know that she was *not* cognizant of? What did his intense interest—even agitation—mean? Confusing her usually calm, clear judgment, the mental questions taxed her already worried brain as she stood eyeing him uncertainly, and it was with a throb of relief that she was suddenly enabled, by another telephone summons, to turn away from him.

He, watching her closely, however, observed her bewilderment grow with the message to which she listened, and with the instinctive movement of one having a right to news, he moved a step or two nearer, his expression, as she again finished with the instrument, causing her to recoil slightly.

With blue eyes glittering, face strangely still, he rapped out two words.

"Bad news?"

"I—don't know," faltered Miss Vene, and she looked round dazedly as her clock chimed an hour. "I don't understand. Only ten o'clock *now*, and the message was from Denning Abbey. The child's there. She *has* run away, or rather flown. Got there by air. And her grandmother is coming to see me to-morrow."

"But she's safe! The girl's safe?" Upon her disjointed sentences the man's voice broke peremptorily.

"Oh yes! Yes, of course! There is evidently no question about—that."

"Thank God!" cried the caravanner, and hastily he bowed himself out, leaving the capable moulder of schoolgirls to sink shakily into a chair, too overwhelmed for the time being by the incomprehensible decamping of the favourite to dwell upon the peculiar behaviour of the stranger.

Pepita's one clear thought as she had fled from Redlands, half demented by the shock she had received, had been a longing for wings with which to cover the miles between herself and Denning Abbey.

"If only I could fly! If only I could fly!" came in sobbing breaths as she ran; and suddenly, her attention caught by a droning noise far above her, the wish took concrete form.

"I will! I will!" she thought. "The aerodrome, of course. Somebody will take me! Somebody must!" And that urge winged her feet over a mile of common at a speed that left her gasping painfully for several minutes at her goal, ere she could coherently frame her request to a startled airman.

"Hire a 'plane, miss!" he echoed in quizzical amaze. "What on earth! Who are you—a runaway princess, or a millionairess?"

"Oh, *don't* rag!" she cried, her great black eyes beseeching. "I'm desperate! I've got to get home quickly—to Denning Abbey. *Do* take me. You wouldn't be long flying me there. Here's a deposit—all the money I have—but Gran will settle up anything. She's Lady Denning."

And the tragedy in her young face had won her her way. Not long afterwards the long-legged airman was having all he could do to keep up with the young passenger he had landed safely in the Abbey park, as she led him in frantic haste towards the old stone building itself.

Bursting presently into the wide old hall, she encountered Ella crossing it, and one glance at the half-crazed expression on the girl's face made the heart of the faithful woman sink like lead.

"Where?" The query was imperative, and Ella answered quickly.

"In the library. But oh, Miss Pepita dear, wait!

Don't dash in on her looking like that. Let me tell her you've come."

But Pepita, dodging the hand that would have restrained her, was away like a hare, and Ella could only follow after as fast as suddenly trembling legs would carry her, reaching the room in time to see the face of her mistress change from bewilderment to fear at the broken reiteration of :

"Oh, Gran ! Oh, Gran !"

It was all that could be got from the panting, overwrought girl during the first few minutes of her arrival there ; but, all at once, as the two anxious women endeavoured to pacify her, she pushed their caressing touch aside, a wide sweep of her arms accompanying her wild glance about the magnificent room.

"I don't belong ! I don't belong !" she cried passionately to Lady Denning, beating a clenched fist into a palm as she spoke. "I know now why you've asked me such queer questions ! Why I'm not like any of the Malcolms. I'm nothing and nobody. I don't belong here !" Then, like the sweep of a sudden tempest, her sobs broke out.

It was Ella who hugged the quivering figure in her arms, while Lady Denning interviewed and settled with the cavalier of the air. Ella who, as in Pepita's childhood days, patted and soothed and crooned, till the sobbing was stilled and the ringletted head lay quiet against her shoulder. And it was from that

refuge of days gone by that Pepita spoke next, when Lady Denning, looking suddenly pinched and old, returned to the room.

"It's quite true, isn't it, that I'm a—a—foundling —that I was left on your doorstep?"

Lady Denning winced at the galled pride in the words and the significant avoidance of the familiar 'Gran', but, having no option, she could only bow her grey head.

"Then why wasn't I told?" was the bitter challenge next flung at her. "Why was I allowed to believe I belonged to you—when I *don't*? Why *did* you deceive me?"

Tears began to roll down Lady Denning's cheeks.

"Pepita—my love!" she cried brokenly. "Don't speak to me like that! Will you blame an old woman, who had lost all she most loved, for clutching you to her heart when the chance came? Child, no one could have treasured you more than I have done!"

But there was no softening yet in the passionate young face opposite her. Pepita's eyes, full of resentment, looked merciless, her pity being only for herself at the moment.

"But you couldn't make me Malcolm, so you might have kept me hidden away here," she went on, with a sullenness so absolutely foreign to her that it struck cruelly at the two women who cared for her so devotedly, "instead of sending me to school to be called Nil and Nemo—nothing and nobody."

"Who *dared*? Pepita, tell me at once! Who *dared* to say such things to you?"

There was no softness about Lady Denning now. With a straightened back and fierce eyes she looked every inch the scion of an old house.

It did more for Pepita than tears could ever have done. Releasing herself from Ella's clasp, she sat upright on the chair-arm as though determined to show as stiff an upper-lip to insult as if she were indeed a descendent of Denning.

"Does it matter," she replied sombrely, "when everybody in Linden knows all about me?"

"Certainly it does," the old lady rapped out sharply. "Everybody in Linden thinks just as much of you as if you *really* were a Malcolm; nobody there would ever dream of flinging in your face the fact that you aren't, and I insist upon knowing who has been so altogether vile and interfering."

"I'm not going back to school any more, so . . . it doesn't *matter* who." Pepita's tone was obduracy itself, and, knowing the will she had to deal with, Lady Denning pressed no further. With a meaning glance at Ella, she said quietly:

"There will be panic at Redlands; we must let Miss Vene know at once that Pepita is here. Telephone her from the post office, please, Ella, and say that I will go to see her to-morrow."

With Pepita to herself, Lady Denning found the

situation slightly easier to manage. Seating herself in the chair, upon an arm of which Pepita still perched stiffly, she let her gaze stray to the pictured faces of those she had lost in the Great War, and as if she had gathered courage and strength from their soldierly bearing, her voice, when she spoke next, was calm and steady.

"My dear," she said, with a white hand stretched out to close over one of Pepita's brown, virile paws, "at that time when you were—left—to my care, I was a broken woman, weighed down with grief over the loss of my husband, my only son, and the dear nephew who had almost a son's place in my heart. I felt that my life was done; I had nothing to care for, no one to live for, so your advent seemed to me like a miracle, giving me hope, a new interest, someone to cherish. I want you to keep that in mind while I tell you all that I know—all that I didn't wish *you* to know yet a while—if ever—because I judged you would grow up the happier in ignorance of it—happier in thinking of me always as really your 'Gran'."

Just the smallest quiver shook the lady's quiet voice here, and she paused a moment to regain control over it, meanwhile casting a swift glance aside into the face so near her own. It told her only a tale of stress within its owner. Pepita's beautiful features, usually alight with mischief and laughter, were still set in bitter lines, her black eyes looking stormily straight

ahead of her, seeing nothing—but her own fallen pride. Lady Denning even wondered whether her words had been listened to, until a sudden frown and restless movement on the girl's part warned her that at any rate her scrutiny was being noticed, and that she had better proceed with her story.

"It was about ten o'clock on a warm night, thirteen years ago, on the first of last month," she continued, "that Ella and Collins and Cook came surging breathlessly up to my room, Ella carrying what looked like a big bundle in her arms. I had heard the clang of the hall-door bell a few minutes before, and was wondering if the summons would prove to be an air-raid warning—one never knew during those dreadful war days what would happen next.

"I had no men about the place—even the gardeners were on war work—and only the three maids then, because so many women were helping the country; so, feeling nervous, the three had answered the door together, to find, lying on a travelling-rug, a lovely sleeping baby girl. You can imagine our astonishment and how we all pored over the slip of paper pinned to the child's clothes. I'll show it to you"; and, after rising to unlock a small box that she took from one of the drawers of her writing-table, Lady Denning resumed her seat and laid on the girl's lap a strip of grease-proof paper, on which was pencilled, in block lettering:

Pepita. A year old to-day. Please adopt me.

There was a tense silence of perhaps half a minute ; then Pepita's long silky lashes swept upwards, showing eyes that had lost much of their storminess, at any rate for the time being. With all her childhood's interest in a story, she was finding her own an absorbing one, in spite of what she considered its unhappy ending.

"You didn't find out—who—rang the bell?" she inquired breathlessly.

"No." Heartened by the girl's tone, Lady Denning took up her recital again readily.

"We women were all too excited to think of doing anything that night beyond attending to your needs; and although I made exhaustive inquiries later, nothing ever came to light regarding your own folk. You might have been left by the fairies for all one could find out. And I tried *hard* to find out, Pepita dear, for two reasons: because I felt it a duty to you, and also because I was ready to go to any lengths to adopt you legally. I mean, I would have paid a big sum to establish a right to you that no one could ever dispute. For I meant to have you, child, before ever those big laughing eyes of yours opened and asked for love. And Ella more than aided and abetted me—she positively urged. You see, she had been my boy's nurse, and the mere

thought of another child in the Abbey made her nearly crazy with joy. The inquiries I felt bound to make were a torture to her; what she would have said or done to anyone turning up to claim you, I *don't* know."

"But no one ever did turn up, and no one ever will—now—I suppose. I'm just—nobody."

Bitterness was back in Pepita's voice—the hardness of a pride hurt beyond any reparation. Lady Denning, cut to the heart, leaned forward and encircled the girl with her arms.

"Pepita," she pleaded, "cannot you forget that—in my love—and—for my sake?"

"Can *you* forget?" was the pointed query thrust at her.

It recalled to Lady Denning, as it was meant to do, all the uneasiness to which she had lately been a prey. How *could* she, with that imp of fear lurking in the background of her mind, forget that Pepita was not truly hers, that she had no shadow of legal claim to the girl upon whom she had showered thirteen years of love and care?

But, again, it only needed the remembrance of those years of devotion to tighten her clasp upon her human treasure.

"I *shall* do, in future," she replied firmly, "if you will stay with me and love me as you've always done."

"But supposing—" a little shiver shook the girl as she spoke—"supposing you were to find out one day that I'm a—a—gypsy? I *might* be."

"It couldn't make any difference, dear," cried Lady Denning, with the utmost decision, "even if it were a possible solution—which I'm convinced it is not; I'll tell you why in a minute. One question first. Has my queer conduct towards that gypsy woman, when you were here the other day, prompted that thought?"

A nod answering the lady, she went on rapidly: "When I show you the beautiful little garments you were wearing when you were left to me, Pepita, you will realize that no gypsy could have clothed you. Besides that, everything about you negatives any question of humble birth. Another thing, your colouring isn't gypsyish at all—it reminds me of the Spanish type. No, Pepita, my real fears have been that either you had been stolen by gypsies and would some day be returned by them to your own people—whoever they are—for a ransom price, or that you might have been abandoned by someone impoverished by the war, who would claim you as soon as you had been brought up and well educated. There have been inquiries—of late—that have puzzled and alarmed me."

"Inquiries! I dare say!" Pepita's eyes were alight with scorn. "How else could I be Nil and Nemo at school?" Then, with a swift change, she wriggled round and flung her arms about Lady Denning. "But, oh, Gran! Darling old Gran! I'm going to stay with you—always—whoever I am.

I'll be Pepita *at* Denning, if I can't be Pepita *of* Denning. Nobody is going to take me away. I'll kill anyone who even tries to."

In a fierce torrent the words came, but they were balm to the woman who heard them. Hugging Pepita to her, she quoted exultingly, remindingly :

" 'What I have I hold' !"

Just after church-time next morning the pupils of Redlands were assembled *en masse*, and in an excitement they found it difficult to suppress, in the school concert-room, awaiting with the greatest curiosity the appearance of the Principal, by whose order they were there.

Her expression, when she arrived on the platform and swept with her keen glance the rows of upturned faces, was more stern than they had ever seen it, and had it not been for the general belief that the summons was 'something to do with Pepita', a good many consciences might have been squirming uncomfortably. As it was, only two at the moment were in that unhappy state.

Without any preamble Venus drove straight to the point.

"After the upset of last evening, doubtless you will all have guessed that I have assembled you here to speak of Pepita," she said in a chilly voice that made her hearers feel 'squiggly down the back', to use the general expression when a really seriou-

wigging was pending. "I understand from Lady Denning, who has motored to Redlands this morning, that Pepita was driven from it yesterday by an attack so utterly mean and cruel as to fill me with horror and disgust. That anyone in my school could have been guilty of such conduct has shocked me exceedingly. I do not know who the culprit is, because Pepita could not be induced to disclose her name, but as I have no doubt that the information that the culprit gained about her victim has been, or will soon be, sown broadcast throughout the school, I am going to settle at once any question that may be arising in your minds.

"I have just learned that Pepita is *not* the granddaughter of Lady Denning, that she was simply adopted by her as a baby and given the name of Malcolm; but that news makes no difference whatever to the fact that I am glad to have at Redlands a girl with such a sporting spirit as Pepita has always shown. That she has always been so generally popular proves how terrible was the attack that makes her refuse to return amongst you. Lady Denning has tried persuasion without effect, and the shock has been such that she feels she cannot insist. Hurt pride is a very difficult thing to combat, but as I am determined to have Pepita back at Redlands, I have resolved that it *shall* be combated—in a way that will restore Pepita's self-respect—and by the one who gave the hurt; so,

for the honour of Redlands, I ask the girl who was responsible for the trouble to stand up. I will wait three minutes."

A deathly silence followed her uncompromising words. Somehow, even the girls who had only been listeners to Kathleen's excited tale on the evening before felt implicated by the Head's condemnation; although they knew themselves to be innocent of any hand in driving Pepita from the school, remorse was at work already, telling them that they had not of late treated Pepita with the old comradeship; that they ought never to have allowed it to be undermined by a girl like Guinevere Castleton, helped by that 'rabbit' of a Kathleen Grey.

But before the allotted time for confession was half spent, the 'rabbit' came up to scratch in a way that surprised them. She had been sitting apprehensively beside her friend, swallowing nervously, and alternatively flushing and paling, during Venus's speech, and casting quick, guilty glances about as though she actually felt the now openly hostile ones being directed with direful significance at herself and Guinevere. Then, as the dreadful pause lengthened, her eyes went round desperately to the latter. Guinevere was white—white to the lips—but those lips were set in a tight, straight line, as though she never meant to unlock them again. As a matter of fact, Guinevere was every bit as aware of censorious eyes, and was grimly trying to force

herself to the humiliation of standing up under them.

But Kathleen, knowing nothing of the struggle going on within her chum, read only obstinacy in her silence, and, spurred on firstly by sincere regret that she had had any part in the campaign against the jolly Pepita, and secondly by fear of the contempt of schoolfellows who knew of her hand in the matter, she suddenly took the initiative, standing up on rather shaky legs, and with the feeling that an earthquake would be welcome in that awful moment.

Pride helped Guinevere then; rather than be dubbed coward, rather than let it be even thought that she would shelter herself behind another, she would have faced any ordeal.

"No, no! Sit down, Kathleen. You know you're not to blame. I am responsible, not you!" she cried, the strained words echoing through the room; and, pulling back into her seat the girl who had shamed her into action, she stood alone.

"Thank you, Guinevere! And thank *you*, Kathleen." In Venus's tone, grave though it was, sounded a certain relief. "It would have been extremely regrettable had I been obliged to penalize the whole school for the delinquencies of one or two girls. Guinevere will please go to my study. Jill, Lady Denning would like you to return with her to the Abbey, until to-morrow morning, when I am hoping that you will bring Pepita back with you. Be ready at two o'clock."

The rest would have loved to cheer the last announcement, but that Venus's disturbed face, as she gave them their dismissal, forbade any such demonstration, and the general opinion of the dispersing girls was that the one to be interviewed was in for a bad time.

Venus opened the interview with an appeal to the better nature which she gave every sinner who came before her credit for possessing.

"Your conduct towards Pepita in this matter, Guinevere," she said, "is the very opposite to what I should have expected from a girl in your position. Pride of birth, long lineage and the promise of a splendid heritage should at least have made you careful for the feelings of one who, until your cruel revelation, believed herself to be equally advantaged. I do not intend to inquire into the circumstances by which you obtained your information; instead, I am going to give you an opportunity of trying to undo some of the harm you have caused. Your apology, tendered in person to the girl you have so insulted, may do what argument and persuasion cannot—bring her back to be happy again at Redlands."

If a thunderbolt had fallen, the girl whom she addressed could not have been more dumbfounded. With anxious interest Venus watched dismay, hauteur, shame, and then contrition appear in swift succession upon Guinevere's handsome face, and was conscious of a throb of thankfulness that the last expression

lingered. Quick to seize upon its promise, she murmured quietly:

"Well? Are you prepared to go with Lady Denning and Jill?"

What the demand cost Guinevere's haughty spirit only she herself knew, but she attempted no compromise, no excuse.

"Yes, Miss Vene," she replied in a low voice; adding, however, after an instant: "But Pepita doesn't like me; perhaps she won't accept my—my apology, and—come back here."

"Then, Guinevere"—Venus spoke very firmly and with absolute finality—"you will have to appeal to her generosity, for, make no mistake, I will have no pupil driven from my school by the unkindness of another, without making an example of the offender. You must give Pepita to understand that your continuance at Redlands rests upon her return to it."

And that was the mandate which sent a very chastened Guinevere to Denning Abbey. There was another pilgrimage to its vicinity on that July Sunday of which the others concerned with Pepita's affairs knew nothing. The caravanner, after his abrupt quittance of Redlands, had been rejoined by his wife late that evening, and the two had talked far into the night, and with the early hours of the summer Sabbath came the harnessing of Jerry for a journey. Later in the day, with the caravan and Jerry resting in a field on the outskirts of Linden, the

caravanner's wife passionately addressed her husband.

"John! John!" she cried. "I'm afraid of myself; afraid I shall give up the struggle. I feel—that some day—I shall go and snatch her away—tell her all—forgetting everything but that she's ours—yours and mine. Oh, John, perhaps we oughtn't to have made the sacrifice. Perhaps if we hadn't she would have been happier—not an unhappy runaway from a school."

Sorrowfully, anxiously, John Williams slipped an arm about the excited woman.

"Teresa—oh, don't, dear!" he implored hastily. "She has always been happy—we've kept ourselves so assured of that, haven't we? And this running away may be from some quite trivial cause. . . ."

"Trivial!" echoed his wife. "How *could* it be? You said that the mistress told you she was the most popular girl in the school. In that case she wouldn't run away for a *trifle*. John! I want to know—I *must* know—what's the matter."

A sigh, so heavy that it was almost a groan, escaped John Williams, and as his arm was withdrawn, his wife swung round upon him in swift compunction.

"John dear! Oh, I'm selfish, selfish!" she cried, dashing away with impatient hand the tears that had gathered in her fine, dark eyes. "You've so much to bear, so much to fight, and I'm making it harder for you. Forgive me!" And her soft hands fluttered up with caressing touch to smooth worried furrows from his brow.

CHAPTER VII

PRIDE IS UPLIFTED AGAIN

PEPITA, slowly traversing back and forth the Abbey's picture-gallery, was a sober, wistful creature in whom her schoolfellows would hardly have recognized their lively, carefree favourite. Thoughts had been such pleasurable things to indulge in; life had been so altogether pleasant to Pepita—up to yesterday. Yesterday! *Was* it only since then that chaos had reigned? It seemed years; and Pepita was amazed that her mirror had not revealed her that day as aged considerably. Anyhow, she *felt* lots older. For one thing, she had a headache for the first time in her life, and headaches had hitherto been reckoned by her an affliction entirely for grown-ups. No one really young should have headaches if they were healthy. But what if her robust health was a thing of the past? What if the shock she had received was going to react upon it?

Pepita pushed the bobbing curls back from her aching forehead and told herself that she didn't care if she were about to fall ill and die. Yet Gran would care, and so would Ella; there was Jill too! Pepita wondered for how long Jill would miss her at school;

who would be her next chum. From that her thoughts went wandering among the other girls—such a jolly crowd they had always been !—glancing off, as from recollection of a nightmare, when Guinevere's face came before her mental vision. Ugh ! With a little shiver she hastily dragged her mind back to the Abbey. She thought of the quiet that would settle upon it if she were no longer there ; of Gran's face when the holiday seasons came round and there was no Pepita to be planned for, and welcomed. Pepita's proud little mouth quivered at that. Mean of her to want to die and leave poor old Gran lonely.

Loneliness in the Abbey would be so horribly felt, too, with all the faces of past Malcolms looking silently down. She knew that by her own present feeling—wishing they could speak, and knowing they never could. She would so have liked to know if any of them had had a trouble as big as hers, and if, so, whether they had managed to live it down, or whether it had gone with them through life, a constant burden, a load on the heart that had never been thrown off.

How their eyes followed her ! Watchful, yet somehow friendly they seemed, as though the owners knew her for an alien, but were sorry for her plight. To and fro, to and fro, Pepita paced, lithely and restlessly as an untamed creature of the jungle, one thought crowding upon another, in a brain tired out with the day's efforts at readjustment.

Ella, after looking in upon her several times and being imperiously waved away, at last attempted real remonstrance.

"Don't stay moping up here any longer, Miss Pepita dear," she urged; "it isn't good for you. Go out into the sunshine for a bit, do. All those faces looking down fair give me the creeps when I'm not feeling just the thing, so I'm sure they're bad for you just now."

But the girl shook her head. "No, they're not. I like them; it's nice to have faces looking the same at you, whatever has happened. And they like *me*, I believe; they don't mind that I'm an interloper. Leave me alone, Ella. I want to be quiet."

So Ella reluctantly withdrew, shaking her head sorrowfully, and longing for the return of her mistress.

That return brought her a surprise, not so much in the appearance of Jill, but in the schoolgirl stranger, who also accompanied Lady Denning. There and then, after one sharp scrutiny of Guinevere's set face and uneasy bearing, Ella made up her mind that she was the cause of the upset at Denning.

"That's the hussy, I'll warrant, and I'd like to shake her," was her angry thought; and then she fell a-wondering why upon earth the girl should have been brought there to act 'like red rag to a bull' to Miss Pepita.

She was soon to be enlightened. In the hall Lady

Denning turned and said, in a voice that was very cold but scrupulously polite to the stranger under her roof :

"As I don't think any of us can feel very comfortable under the present tension, I expect you would prefer to get the apology over at once, wouldn't you ?"

"Please, Lady Denning." Guinevere's voice had a choked sound, and a nervous red spot burned on each of her cheeks. Now was her rival's chance to get even, and an icy fear clutched at Guinevere's proud heart lest Pepita should take the opportunity of getting her sent from Redlands in disgrace. For she was under no illusions. She knew that if she were in Pepita's place she would jump at a chance of covering such an adversary with ignominy, and, recalling Pepita's tempestuous face of the evening before, she felt despairingly that she would be humbling herself to no avail.

But the humbling had to be done whatever its outcome. Venus's words and attitude had left no doubt as to that, so Guinevere screwed herself up to the effort with all the will she possessed.

"In the gallery ?" Lady Denning's brows went up surprisedly at Ella's answer to her inquiry regarding Pepita's whereabouts. "Very well, I'll show you there on my way to my room, Guinevere. Jill, my dear, run along and amuse yourself in the library with a book for a while ; you shall see Pepita soon."

It was not Lady Denning's intention to be present at the meeting of the youthful antagonists. For one thing, she judged that an adult presence would hinder rather than help matters; and for another, she had no desire to embarrass Guinevere still further by watching the lowering of her flag of pride.

So . . . into the long apartment Guinevere stepped alone.

For a moment she stood, after closing the heavy door, seeking the occupant with quick glances all about the unfamiliar place; but Pepita, curled up now from sheer weariness in one of the deep window recesses at the farther end, had the advantage; up and out of it in a flash before Guinevere's gaze had found her, she sent a furious repulse ringing down the length of the gallery.

"What are *you* doing here? Don't dare to come near me! Don't *dare*, I say!" And the gleam of sun shining upon her showed her so fiercely challenging that Guinevere involuntarily edged back to grasp the doorhandle again.

But the retreat was only momentary. Desperation lent her courage to say, after a tense pause:

"Pepita! I've come to say—I'm sorry!"

Pepita stamped. "I don't want your sorrow. I only want you to clear out of here; you've come to gloat—that's all."

But Guinevere advanced a little.

"I haven't," she panted. "I've come to apologize for—for—my beastliness—truly I have."

"Huh! I can't see a girl like *you* coming to apologize, unless, of course, you've been made to," was the sneer flung at her. "But, in any case, I wouldn't *accept* your apology—I wouldn't believe in it, so now—go away! I won't have you near me."

Guinevere crept nearer, nevertheless, although she could find nothing more to say for a moment or two.

Mutely, as though seeking inspiration, she gazed at the pictured Malcolms, and, gazing, the enormity of the wrong she had done to Pepita came home to her. With growing compunction she realized how dreadful must be Pepita's feeling of severance from a family and name that she had always claimed for her own. What would she herself have thought of a person who had dealt such a blow to her? Nothing but abhorrence and contempt, she knew. No wonder, then, that Pepita spurned her overtures.

Genuine pleading was in Guinevere's next attempt.

"Pepita, if you'd *only* forgive me! Honestly, I'm as sorry as I can be now, that I was so spiteful. I was mad—mad with jealousy, because you're so popular. . . ."

"Well, then," came the implacable interruption, "now's your chance to be the cock of the walk at Redlands, and I wish you joy of it. You've got rid of me for good and all, so you've a clear field."

"I haven't! I haven't! Oh, Pepita, I haven't!" The words were a wail; Guinevere rushed forward on a sudden impulse and, sinking in an undignified huddle at Pepita's feet, began to sob wildly. "I w—won't be at Redlands. Venus is g—going to t—turn me out if you d—don't go back, and I'd s—sooner d—drown myself than f—face my people."

Pepita made no movement at Guinevere's advance, save to put both hands behind her back—an action that spoke for itself: she had no mind that the groveller should snatch at either of them.

"Ah—h—h!" she breathed, with a kind of bitter triumph. "*Now* I understand. I *thought* something for yourself was at the back of your being sorry." And if the blazing black eyes could have scorched, Guinevere would have shrivelled where she cowered.

She sobbed on, but with no relinquishing of her fight against the other's obstinacy.

"Oh, Pepita, don't be so cruel. I can't help being afraid—for myself, b—but I'm more sorry—about you—than anything else. If you'll only come back I'll show you in every possible way *how* sorry."

"I shouldn't go back for that," Pepita replied deliberately. "If I did go back it would be because I knew that the other girls are a decent sort, who would be just the same to me as they've always been; but—I couldn't go back and be *happy* again, so—why should I?"

"You'd save *me*," gulped Guinevere.

"Why *should* I?" reiterated Pepita. "Would you have done the same for *me* if *I'd* done the damage?"

"No," confessed the supplicant. "But you're more generous than I am. No wonder the girls all like you. *I'm* a—a *pig*, in some ways."

Did the merest ghost of a flash of humour show in Pepita's eyes as Guinevere touched the depths in her self-denunciation? If so, it vanished again with all the quickness of a wraith.

"Well, you said it—*I* didn't," she retorted gruffly. "But I'm tired, and my head aches; I wish you'd stop bothering me."

"I will . . . if . . . if . . . Oh, Pepita, *do* say it!" Guinevere had struggled half-way up, was on her knees. Pepita swung on her heel; it wasn't a pleasant sight to see even her rival in such a humiliating position; Pepita felt no triumph at it, only a sense of disgust that any girl should have brought herself to it.

"I *can't*," she said, over her shoulder; "not at present, anyhow! I'll tell Gran later, when I've been able to think." And with that cold comfort, but catching at a straw of hope, nevertheless, Guinevere was obliged to leave her.

It did not need more than her dejected face to tell Lady Denning that the peace mission had failed.

The lady had been sitting in an alcove awaiting her emergence, and, angry as she was with the disturber of the Abbey's harmony, she yet felt a touch of pity for the girl who had allowed vindictiveness to swamp her better nature. For, questioned on the way to Denning as to the motive for her attack upon Pepita, Guinevere had been forced to lay bare a few facts regarding the rivalry which existed between her and the school favourite.

So Lady Denning, determined to be fair in spite of her natural indignation, piloted the young stranger downstairs to the drawing-room, and did her best to set her a little at ease.

"We'll leave Pepita alone for a while to think things over," she said; "if she doesn't appear within half an hour I'll send Jill up to see what *her* persuasion can do. I want things to come as right as they can for all our sakes."

Guinevere dabbed again at eyes already red; there was nothing of the peacock about her now.

"You're being ever so kind—I don't deserve it a bit," she murmured tremulously. "Oh, Lady Denning, I *do* so wish I hadn't let my horrid temper get the better of me."

"My dear, I'm afraid we all have bitter occasion to wish that at some time or other," the lady replied, rather sadly; and then, with a gentleness and simplicity that awakened interest and sympathy in the

contrite listener, she told her the story of how Pepita came to Denning Abbey.

She had barely concluded it before an urgent knock sounded on the door, and Ella entered hard upon it with a strangely agitated face.

"Oh, ma'am," she panted, wringing her hands, "there's a Mrs. John Williams asking to see you, and—and—oh, ma'am, SHE'S MISS PEPITA GROWN UP !"

Lady Denning turned very white. The upset of the day before had told upon her after the nervous strain she had been undergoing for some time, and this new shock set her heart racing painfully. But with a supreme effort at self-control she rose, steadying herself by a hand on the back of her chair.

"I must—see her, Ella," she said, a trifle breathlessly. "Show her—in here, please, and—stand by."

"Oh—h—h—h ! The gypsy dancer !"

Those were the words that greeted the woman who, within the next minute, was standing face to face with the mistress of the Abbey, whose power of speech seemed suddenly to have deserted her as she gazed with a kind of tragic intuition at the visitor.

Just for an instant the latter glanced aside at the bewildered Guinevere who, hardly aware that amazement had forced the words from her, was fairly gaping. Then the woman drew up her slight figure haughtily and spoke coldly, with just the faintest trace of a foreign accent.

"Pardon me! Mrs. John Williams." And then, into the strange pause that ensued, came—Pepita.

Having descended the staircase and pushed open the door of the first room she came to, in quest of Lady Denning, she entered laggingly, throwing a languidly curious glance at Ella standing like a graven image just inside.

"Gran," she began, then halted tongue and step as her gaze fell upon the stranger of whose presence she had been so utterly unaware.

The woman flashed round at the voice, and a quick gasp escaped Pepita, for there, except for the difference between girlhood and womanhood, stood her own exact counterpart.

The five people in the room might have been waxworks for all the motion that could have been discerned for perhaps twenty seconds. Suddenly, with a cry of longing that her rich voice made the more appealing, the strange woman threw out her arms with a yearning gesture.

"Pepita! Little one! Ah, come to me!"

But the girl shrank back against Ella, clutching at the old nurse's arm as to a rock of defence against a tide of bewilderment; her great eyes were fixed in a kind of fearful fascination upon the stranger.

"Who—who are you?" she stammered.

"Who?" echoed the woman. "Pepita, child! That, looking at me, you should ask such a question!

Who *should* I be but your mother—who loves you?"

Harshly, in reply to that, Ella's voice broke in.

"Does the mother who loves her child leave that child—a helpless babe—on a stranger's doorstep?"

"Ah! You are quick to blame!" The foreigner's voice and gestures were passionate, and her accent was increased by excitement as her attention turned on her accuser. "You do not understand. To know would surely be to pity—my husband and me! But oh, do not think that I have come to snatch away—our daughter—not that. Oh, never that——!"

"You couldn't!" interrupted Pepita indignantly. "I wouldn't let you. Gran and Ella have been everything to me—everything!"

Impulsively the stranger spoke again. "Do I not know it? Ah, none better! But, Pepita, my little Pepita, do not be cruel to your mother," and her arms stretched out yearningly once more.

It was impossible to resist entirely the pleading beauty and sincerity of the woman. In the brilliant face that was such a wonderful replica of her own, some softening influence was at work.

"Mother!" repeated Pepita softly. "I'd like to have a mother and a father, but—I couldn't give up —Gran."

In a flash Lady Denning understood that a measure of healing had come to Pepita's pride. With the news of a living mother and father she no

longer felt a nobody, even though she could not claim the name of Malcolm. So, determined to seize any chance of comforting the girl, she rose nobly to the occasion.

"You said that if we knew your story we should pity you, Mrs. Williams," she said gently. "Then tell us. Perhaps the truth will help us *all*."

The stranger's eyes glowed with gratitude.

"Oh, you are good; you are kind!" she cried vibrantly. "It's no wonder that my child loves you. There's so much to say that I know not how to begin. Ah, how *shall* I begin?"

But the story was not to be told after all—as yet.

Upon the woman's pause to collect her thoughts broke a wild-sounding cry from the hall.

"Lady Denning! Ella! Pepita! Oh, come, somebody!" And in a startled mob the five in the drawing-room crowded through into the doorway, to obey the frantically-beckoning hand of a frightened-looking Jill.

Waiting alone in the library for what she hoped would be a satisfactory conclusion of all the upset to her chum, she had prowled restlessly around the big room until she found a book sufficiently engrossing to claim her interest for the time being, and then had curled up luxuriously in the deep armchair near an old wooden screen of Moorish design. Growing absorbed in her book, she had been reading for some

little time when the sound of a half-smothered exclamation drew her gaze in the direction of one of the long, widely-flung windows, the sills of which formed wide, shallow steps into the room, from the turf that grew close up to the Abbey's walls. Jill's heart seemed to give a jump then, for, balanced on the sill, looking in, was the white-haired caravanner, whom since their last meeting she had regarded as quite crazy.

Now his gaze was apparently fixed on the pictured faces above the fireplace. And, as Jill's startled glance flashed between them and the intruder, feelings of understanding and bewilderment alternated overwhelmingly in her mind. Recalling how she and Pepita had compared notes after their first encounter with the caravanner, as to something vaguely familiar in his face, a cry of surprise would have burst from her had not fear frozen it on her lips; fear because the actions and uncanny mutterings of the man who had entered only heightened her suspicion of his sanity.

Immediately beneath the big photograph of the youngest soldier he stood now, alternately gazing at it, then brushing fingers over his eyes as though to make sure he saw correctly before gazing again, the while keeping up a low-toned conversation with himself that sounded to Jill like someone memorizing a lesson aloud.

Unstrung, and ready to scream at the eeriness with which he filled her, she slipped stealthily from her chair and behind the screen, through the lattice-work of which she could still watch, but without the dread that at any instant the man might turn his head and discover her.

But not for long was she able to stand even that sheltered watch. When, with a groan, he sank into a chair and buried his head in his hands, nerve failed her ; softly as a ghost, out she glided from her hiding-place, across the room behind the unsuspecting intruder, then made a mad dash for the hall and help, quite convinced that the caravanner was either mad or ill.

Certainly the face he raised at the sudden commotion caused by the tumultuous entrance of the party of six was a dazed one. But, as though swept away by a puff of magic, the bewilderment cleared, and as he got to his feet the light of a great joy transfigured him.

And almost simultaneously with an excited cry of : "Oh, John ! Nephew John !" rang out another.

"It's Mr. John—back from the dead. Oh ! Oh !" And then into the caravanner's outstretched arms Lady Denning and Ella rushed together.

Bending his tall head as he encircled them both, he said, with a tremor in his deep voice :

"Auntie ! Ella ! I thought it must all be a dream, a vision, till *you* came in."

But as he looked over the heads of his embracers at his wife, his face clouded again with bewilderment, and a worried look was in the blue eyes whose questions had for so long tugged at her heart. And now cold truth laid an icy hand upon it. In a flash she understood what had happened. Something —a shock of some kind—had restored the partly paralysed brain; he had become suddenly aware of kinship between himself and the mistress of Denning Abbey, and in that discovery she, his wife, had no place—as yet. Would she ever have it? She knew it was possible that his returned consciousness of the past might blot out all that had intervened in those sixteen years of memory's suspension; and the awful thought wrung a wild cry from her.

"John! John! Why do you look at me in that strange way? Don't forget *me* now—your Teresa!"

"Teresa! Teresa!" His brow puckered as he echoed the name, but she shivered at the puzzlement in his tone, then shrank back, her face tragic in its woe as he muttered fretfully: "Go away, please. Don't bother me. I—I can't—think—clearly!" And down upon Lady Denning's grey head went his own white one.

Pepita's wide-eyed gaze, which had been flashing from one to another of the chief participants in the sudden drama, was now all for her mother. Instinctively she edged up to the stricken-looking figure

and slipped an arm about her. But the action seemed to sever the last shred of the woman's self-control, and for a moment or two only the sound of her half-smothered sobs broke the queer, strained silence that had fallen.

Anxious of face, yet with an illuminating light in her eyes, Ella suddenly took command of the situation. Hastily drawing away from Lady Denning and her nephew, she motioned the others to follow, as she gently led the sobbing woman out of sight behind the screen, to murmur soothingly in her ear :

"There now, ma'am, don't distress yourself so. Just keep quiet for a while and everything will come right."

The Spaniard's face, full of desperate appeal, was lifted quickly at that, one trembling hand holding fast to her daughter, while the other was thrust out to clutch at Ella.

"You really—think so?" She breathed pantingly. "Oh, but he looked—at me as if—as if—I were a stranger!"

But Ella's reply was as reassuring as her transfigured face.

"Wait!" she counselled in a whisper. "It will all come right, I'm sure. Only give him time. Sh!"

Hardly daring to breathe in their suspense and excitement, the quintette behind the screen watched through its interstices the sudden raising of the man's

head and the passing of a hand across his eyes as though he would clear away a mist.

"You'll feel better presently, John," they heard Lady Denning's soft voice say, and the wonderful understanding and sympathy of it thrilled the listeners. All the soothing influence of a mother over the child who has been frightened or hurt was in it as she added: "Don't be in a hurry, dear. You'll remember everything in time."

"Yes, it's all—coming back." His words in reply were a strange blend of hesitancy and growing conviction. "The guns—the shelling—that hole—then silence and—and——"

"Steady, John!" Lady Denning urged again, and, as though calmed by the injunction, he went on more evenly, with less agitation.

"Right! I'm getting a grip on myself now, Auntie. Sort of shock both ways, you know"—and a little shaky laugh escaped him.

Lady Denning breathed more easily, and shot a relieved glance in the direction of the screen, gratefully conscious of Ella's intuitive removal of herself and the others into temporary obscurity. The light of reason was clearing away from her nephew's face the daze that had frightened her by its intensity. Her mind, which had flown wildly to thoughts of a doctor, now lost its terror in the belief that all would be well with her nephew—with care. But there

must be nothing to worry or distress him. How he came to be alive who had long been mourned for lost, what had brought about his appearance at the Abbey, how he had come by a Spanish wife who called herself Mrs. Williams, what motive had lain behind their action in committing their child to her care, were questions she dared not press, much as she longed to have them answered. That crown of snow-white hair, which had been a burnished brown when she had last seen it, told her unmistakably that heavy tribulation had fallen to the lot of the otherwise still youthful-looking man who bore it. So, coaxingly, she urged what she thought best for him for the moment.

"Talk again presently, John. Rest for a while now. I'm sure you ought."

But he shook his head, and his gaze wandered restlessly about the room.

"I couldn't," he told her. "There's too much going on here"—he tapped his forehead. "I want —who *is* it I want? Ah, of course, Teresa, my wife! Where is she?"

No need to ask for long. Ere the last sentence was finished she was before him again, buoyant once more, but careful—restrained, for fear of doing him harm, the others hovering a little nervously behind her.

But in that moment of fresh recollection the

caravanner had no thought for anyone but the woman whose devotion had carried him through the long, difficult years of his affliction. His blue eyes held a light that she had never seen in them before, as he took her hands and drew her close.

"John, dear, then everything *is* all right now. Oh, tell me what it all means," she breathed.

His gaze sought and included the others in his thankful answer. "That my memory is restored, and by a sight of my own photograph. Sixteen years and a war have made me look considerably older, but the photo up there is still sufficiently like me to bear witness that I am John Williams *Malcolm*."

"Malcolm!" The name came from Pepita's lips like an echo. Transfixed by the astounding scene and the new revelation that was gradually penetrating to her understanding, she had stood, gripping convulsively at an arm both of her chum and the girl who had been her enemy, looking from the white-haired man to his photograph.

"Malcolm!" she repeated, rapture tinged with a kind of awe in her voice. "And—and—my *father*! Then—*I'm* Malcolm too, after all. Oh—h—everybody!"

And in the next minute, held fast in her mother's arms for the first time since her babyhood, a flood of happy tears was washing away Pepita's headache and heartache too.

"Isn't it *my* turn now, Pepita?" John Malcolm wistfully inquired when at length her eyes strayed with a half-shy fascination in his direction. "Haven't you a welcome for—your father?"

Withdrawing herself quickly from her mother's clasp, she threw up her arms impulsively to draw his face down to her level.

"*Dear* Daddy!" she said softly, and, her eyes shining like stars after rain, she kissed him.

But solicitude for his welfare presently calmed the excitement of the charmed circle about him.

"John dear," his wife cried light-heartedly, but firmly, nevertheless, "you are too brown to be called a ghost, but you must sit as quietly as one for a while and rest. You see"—she turned, with a swift change to seriousness, on the others—"he has needed such care all these years. I've been afraid, oh, so afraid for him—the restlessness, the depression—especially since we parted with our little Pepita. That is what brought me here to-day. I didn't come selfishly; but we knew she was unhappy, and I feared the effect upon him. So I slipped away here secretly to-day, to ask if—if—we might just make ourselves known to her and see her sometimes, without making any claim, without trying to take her away from the love and care with which she has been surrounded since we made our great sacrifice for—her sake."

"Sacrifice?" Pepita sat between both parents,

with a hand for each, but her eyes turned wonderingly on her mother. "Then you didn't just give me away because you didn't—care—for me?"

"Dear child, *no!*" Her mother's voice broke pathetically on the denial. "We were just too poor —too down in the world—members of a circus troupe; we *dared* not keep you with us—for *your* sake."

"Circus people! Oh!" It was Lady Denning who ejaculated here.

Swift to catch the dismay in her tone and her dubious glance at his wife, John Malcolm explained, a trifle whimsically:

"Only through force of circumstances, Auntie. Don't run away with the idea that my wife is a circus lady born. Teresa is the daughter of a Spanish don, who cast her off for marrying the penniless derelict whose life and reason she undoubtedly saved."

Indignation coloured Lady Denning's cheeks; before she could voice it, however, her nephew added quietly:

"But perhaps now that the derelict has found a family and an old name, Pepita may soon meet her grandfather, and see a real castle in Spain."

Lady Denning, sitting beside her newly-found niece, suddenly bent and kissed her.

"Forgive me, my dear," she cried gently; "we

all have our pride, but I might have known that anyone who has been so kind to John couldn't be anything but a splendid woman. Welcome to Denning."

"And we'll all live together here, won't we?" Pepita burst out eagerly. "And Gran will be Gran for ever and ever."

The old lady nodded at her grandniece in a significant and highly-satisfied way.

"*That* she will, my love," was her swift reply, "because your father, as heir of Denning, will take the place of the son I lost. John"—to her nephew—"it seems like a miracle that one of my three has been given back. When the news came that you were missing, my hope was that you might still be alive somewhere; but when time passed and no news came that hope had to be abandoned, although for months after that, even, I found myself watching for a letter, listening for your voice. And that your child should have been left in *my* care, of all people, is just as much of a miracle. Strange that the place where so much of your boyhood was spent did not strike you familiarly."

"It did, Auntie, in a sense," replied Mr. Malcolm. "The neighbourhood in general, I mean. Teresa will tell you of the spell it seemed to cast over me, although I could not explain why. I felt at home in it, and she could not lure me from it. The Abbey I never approached—until to-day, when I missed

Teresa and feared that mother-love had got the better of all else at last, and so—I followed to where I judged I should find her. And I think memory must have been fighting its way through my poor straining brain as I walked across the park, because every step of the way seemed somehow part of a life I had known before; it only needed a sight of the photograph as I was to send my mind back to—to—where it—left off—in France; it was like—like—the sliding of a shutter—oh heavens!"

The recital that had grown all at once so agitated and disjointed ceased abruptly, and with the shuddering groan that had so unnerved Jill the white head was bowed low as its owner again buried his face in his hands as though to shut out a terrible sight.

But, in an instant, down on her knees in front of him went his beautiful wife, to draw his head caressingly, protectingly, to her shoulder.

"John! John! You *shall* not think of those past horrors to-day!" she cried passionately. "To-morrow—perhaps—you shall tell us all that you remember; unburden your soul once and for all; and then Gran and Pepita and I will make you forget that cruel past—for ever. Now rest again, dear, while I tell on about Pepita." And as that warm-hearted creature slid an arm about his neck, Mrs. Malcolm left the rôle of comforter to their daughter and took up the story concerning her.

"It was I who left Pepita on that June night," she said, "and with what a heavy heart you two who have loved her so can perhaps guess. But it would have hurt still more to have seen her grow up as a gypsy child would, with none of the advantages of a life to which we both knew she belonged, on my husband's side as well as on my own, although we had no knowledge of his identity. Drifting to this neighbourhood, we heard of the Abbey, the affection people felt for its mistress, of her bereavements and loneliness, and we decided to put our information to the test. Pepita should be in good hands, carefully nurtured, brought up in her proper sphere, if sacrifice of our own feelings could bring it about; and so I laid her down that night, hid until my ring was answered and the babe taken in; then—*our* loneliness began, a loneliness all the harder to bear because, to school ourselves, we deliberately put distance between us and her—at first. But John's health would not stand that strain for long; so, in order that we could keep in her neighbourhood, I became a dancer in the Calchester Hippodrome, which is now his."

"Likewise a caravan—through your earnings," he put in quietly.

She shrugged her shoulders as she threw him a laughing glance.

"But what easy earnings! To dance! What is it but to play? To me it is a mere nothing."

"Oh, but, Mrs. Malcolm, you're marvellous at it!"

The outburst came enthusiastically from Guinevere; she and Jill, outsiders, yet deeply thrilled listeners, had hung on every word that had been spoken. And, as every eye turned surprisedly upon her, Guinevere continued: "I saw you at the Hippodrome, and I mixed you up with Pepita. I thought it was Pepita there—dressed up as a gypsy—and dancing."

Mrs. Malcolm looked the speaker over with a rapier-like keenness.

"Ah," she cried, wagging a finger and laughing, "and so you spied afterwards! Oh, but my husband was angry with you and your friends, Miss Inquisitive, on the day when you all climbed the cliffs to spy on us. But I dared not show my face in any place where Pepita was known."

"No wonder you mistook Pep that day, Mr. Malcolm," chimed in Jill. "Of course, at a little distance you thought she was Mrs. Malcolm."

Calm again now, he nodded, smiling reminiscently. "It was only by bolting on the instant that I kept my tongue and my hands from giving away my secret. You see, when I found it was Pepita, I wanted to yell out who I was and clutch at her. You must have thought me mad to skidaddle as I did, looking as if I'd seen a ghost."

"We *did*," Pepita told him serenely, her arm still round him in a half-throttling fashion that seemed vastly to his liking, however, for he submitted to it very contentedly. "It was one puzzle coming on top of another, because all the girls except Jill, who was as ignorant as I was, were beginning to act so strangely towards me. I understand now, of course, that S'vere had begun to fish out things to tell them about me."

"Severe?" Her father voiced what was evidently a general query among the adult participators in the confab.

Pepita nodded her curls in the direction of her decidedly uncomfortable-looking rival.

"Vere, short for Guinevere, with the S tacked on, which suited her," she explained mischievously; "but we may be able to knock it off in future."

Guinevere sprang up at that, on her face a medley of expressions—doubt, hope, the dawn of joy.

"Oh, Pepita!" she cried, edging nearer with an eager air to the tormenting black orbs that were surveying her with all their old mockery; "you wouldn't rag me if you didn't mean to go back to school and be happy, would you? It *does* mean that you've forgiven me, doesn't it? *Please*, Pep!"

"Rather!" was the emphatic response. "Considering that it was all through you I've found a mother and father. But, I say, Vere, old thing, if you

and the others puzzled *me*, I set *you* some conundrums, didn't I? For instance, you were jolly well baffled by the gypsy who stole the tuck. Own up, now!"

"There!"—Guinevere was one broad smile—"then it was you! But you had me beaten! I simply *couldn't* decide whether or no. You see, I *had* given you credit for a dual thingumigig—you know, somebody who is two persons in one."

Pepita's eyes, wider and rounder than they had ever been before, were almost matched by her rosy mouth for one amazed moment. Then: "Dual—dual—*me!* Two of *me*! Oh, my hat!" she exploded, and went off into a peal of elfish laughter that did every heart good.

Five o'clock found an intensely happy party gathered for tea on the Abbey's sweeping lawn, after which the two strangers to its hoary walls had to be shown all over the beautiful old building, Mrs. Malcolm and Guinevere finding so much to admire and everybody so much to talk about, that night had fallen before a sudden recollection flashed upon Lady Denning.

"Here we are, with the clouds all rolled away, girls," she cried to the animated three hobnobbing hilariously, "and we haven't given one single thought to Miss Vene's distress about everything!"

"Great Scott! And I'd forgotten all about poor

old Jerry and the van!" cried Mr. Malcolm. "I must go and collect him, Auntie."

"Couldn't you get a message through to Redlands at the same time?" queried his aunt. "Awkward, perhaps, being Sunday, but you could telephone from somewhere, though it's rather late. . . ."

Mr. Malcolm gave the girls a waggish smile.

"I vote for a telegram in the morning instead," he replied mischievously. "Something to puzzle 'em. Better finish up all our mysteries in style, you know. The girls can bunk down to the post office first thing with the wire."

And this was the message that set everybody agog at Redlands about nine o'clock next morning:

Everything has come right. Expect seven happy people later.

Malcolm of Denning.

CHAPTER VIII

A WONDERFUL STORY

The Crows' Nest had never known such a bombardment as it received in the games interval on the afternoon of that exciting Monday. The only wonder was that its lookouts were not completely wrecked by the chattering crowd of girls who managed to find elbow-room. And for all the world like a flock of birds they perched on the surrounding branches, awaiting the crumbs of information that would satisfy their curiosity. Games had quite gone by the board. What *was* the use of commencing any, the girls argued, when Malcolm of Denning, et cetera, might blow in at any minute, so, excited anticipation being also the lot of the elders at Redlands, youth got its own way there for once.

Venus was most smilingly complacent.

"I don't think any of us can give our minds seriously to anything until the Seven Mystery is unravelled," she told the games mistress. "Just let the girls amuse themselves in their own way this afternoon; you would never get any satisfaction from them in their present excited state."

She was right. The Seven Mystery was proving all engrossing.

"Seven!" squealed Kathleen, one of the flock of watchers in the Crows' Nest. "The number seems simply stamped on my brain, and yet how can it be right when Lady Denning, Pep, Jill and Guinevere only make four?"

"Perhaps the post office people made a mistake in the wire," was a suggestion that caused a momentary lull of chatter for thought.

"Or Guinevere has found some more dual people," cried a wag amongst the crowd.

The remark caused a general sniggering. In their most puzzled moments the girls had never quite been able to swallow that idea regarding the effervescent Pep, quick-change artist of moods though they knew her to be.

"Still, the 'Malcolm of Denning' couldn't be a post office mistake," argued Kathleen, reverting to the previous remark. "I expect the whole thing is a concoction of Pep's to keep us guessing. Perhaps that, and the 'everything has come right' bit, just means that she's forgiven Vere and is coming back as if nothing had happened—as though she *were* a Malcolm after all."

"Well, none of *us* will ever want to remind her that she isn't," another voice said stoutly. "Good old Pep! She's one of the best. Give her a cheer, everybody. Hip! Hip——"

The cheer could not have burst forth at a more

fortuitous time. Ear-splitting 'rahs' were still sounding when a big open car whizzed into sight, a little forest of hands waving acknowledgment from it, as it turned in at the school gates.

After that, rents in gym tunics and the thuds of scrimmaging girls dropping out of the old oak tree were legion.

"The caravanners!" burst amazedly from Kathleen, as she headed the race.

"And Pep's Ella!" panted another girl.

"Then seven's *right*!" came in triumphant chorus.

An ecstatic squeal followed from Kathleen.

The caravanners are the happy ending, I believe. Look at Mrs. Caravanner just stepping out! *She's* the one Vere and I got so mixed over. *Can* you wonder?"

Nobody *could*, judging from the universal stare that an absolutely tongue-tied crowd of girls presently fixed on the smiling mother and daughter posing before them, in obvious enjoyment of the sensation they were causing. For Mrs. Malcolm's lissom figure was almost as slim as Pepita's; she had the same black rumple of curls; dancing black eyes and identical dimples in glowing cheeks made her look wonderfully youthful. Only when her face was in repose was her maturity at all marked, and then what it lost in youthfulness it gained in womanly sweetness. Every gazing girl fell in love with her on the spot.

And what of the man who had for so long been a familiar figure, yet a mystery, to the pupils of Redlands? He moved out from the shadow of the car beside Lady Denning, just as the hall door of Redlands exuded its Principal and staff in a body.

As seemed fitting in such special circumstances, it was left to Pepita to give the first sop to the burning curiosity of all the onlookers, and she did it in her own characteristic fashion.

"Ladies and schoolgirls," she cried, linking arms with her parents with an ease of manner that led them to exchange delighted glances, "meet my father and mother—Mr. and Mrs. John Williams Malcolm of Denning and—a caravan!"

But instead of quelling astonishment, this amazing introduction only increased it. Miss Vene, after gazing as helplessly as everyone else from one caravanner to the other, at last recovered herself sufficiently to stammer out apologetically:

"Do please pardon us all, Mr. and Mrs. Malcolm, for staring as though you were curios; but we really are completely at sea about everything. You, sir"—she turned whimsical eyes on Pepita's father—"were Mr. Williams at our last meeting, and your reappearance is as baffling as your disappearance was, so I am going to voice what I know is the desire of everyone here and ask for 'a story, please'."

It was told in the fresh air that had done so much

for the health of poor war-wrecked John Malcolm. On the cedar-studded lawn of Redlands a rapt company listened to a tale from him which had never been told before, even to his wife, because the prime mover in it had had no recollection of the events which had changed brown-haired, boyish Lieutenant Malcolm into the white-haired derelict, John Williams, of nowhere.

Facing the wide half-circle of listeners, he let his brilliant blue eyes range the attentive faces about him, till they found Pepita, squatting, cross-legged, on the grass beside Jill, with Guinevere and Kathleen in close proximity. Then, with a little smile for his daughter, he began:

"I'm very grateful to you all for wanting my story, because it's going to help me tremendously to tell what I know of it, and to hear the part of it that only my wife can fill in properly. You see, for about sixteen years I haven't known to whom I belonged; apart from the knowledge that I had a wife and child —a daughter who didn't know of *my* existence until yesterday—I wasn't aware of another relative in the whole wide world, so perhaps you can dimly guess what a shock it was yesterday to have those sixteen years bridged by my own photograph hanging up in the library at Denning Abbey, and suddenly to realize that I was among my own folk, Lady Denning being my aunt. Of course, a shock that has brought such

a sense of security and happiness into the restless craving life that has been mine for so long isn't likely to do harm, but, because, along with returned memory, there has of necessity come remembrance of the terrible events that caused its loss, my wife thinks it best that I should bring all my bogies out into the light of narrative and so get rid of them for good and all."

Here, just for a moment or so, he paused, and the spellbound listeners saw his brown hands clench till the knuckles gleamed whitely, his blue eyes look out into space with fear in them, as though the bogies of terrible recollection were resisting his endeavours to thrust them forth. But on the instant that his gaze dropped again and read the sympathy in the faces about him, he gathered new courage for his effort.

"Well," he went on, "nobody wants to talk or hear more about war than is necessary, so I'm not going to harrow your feelings or my own with anything that I remember of it, except just the part that belongs to my story. Ever since my memory returned yesterday, incidents and recollections of people concerned in them have come flashing before my mental vision, something like magic-lantern or cinema pictures do before one's eyes, so I expect you'll all understand that my brain is in rather a whirligig state, just as your brains might be after going to a picture show, thinking over all the exciting things you'd seen. In fact, I couldn't sleep much last

night for trying to sort things and people out in my mind. But I'll try to make clear what happened on my twenty-second birthday, when I'd been about six months in France. I was training at Sandhurst when war broke out, so, like all youngsters, eager to be in the scrum, I worked myself into it as early in the game as I could, although I found it far from being a game when I got there. I remember, as if it were yesterday, the letters and gifts I received on that eventful birthday—things like those seem to take on such an added value in the trenches—a jolly parcel from my aunt here giving me particular pleasure, because she had mothered me so often at Denning during my boyhood."

Here, glances which had turned interestedly on Lady Denning were hastily averted, quite a lot of hasty swallowing at queer lumps in throats proving that an emotion her brave old face was trying so hard to hide had been noticed and sympathized with.

Her nephew proceeded slowly, evidently still finding the piecing together of past events no easy matter. But even the impetuous schoolgirls felt no impatience at the thoughtful sentences, so graphic were they, so arresting the man's tone and looks.

"That night—that birthday night—I was in a big advance against the enemy, and the last thing I remembered about the actual fighting—until yesterday—was the tremendous explosion of a shell. After

that there was a blank till I remember myself heaving, heaving, at a smothering load on top of me, and then struggling up from underneath men who had had less lucky escapes than mine, out of a shell-hole into a moonlit waste, where there was utter silence. I didn't understand then what the silence meant. I learned afterwards that I had been rendered deaf for a time. All that I seemed really sensible of was a head that hurt confoundedly and numbed legs that wouldn't carry me. I had a crazy idea—though it didn't appear a bit crazy to me then, I can assure you—that the end of the world had come, and that by some queer chance I had escaped its destruction, and was the only living creature in it. Why I should have wished to live on in such circumstances I can't imagine; it's a strange thing—that instinct to fight for one's life in spite of suffering and fear, even in the face of despair. Anyhow, I had no thought of dying. My one idea was to get clear, cold water—bright and sparkling as it bubbles from a spring—to drink and to bathe my throbbing head.

"So—as I couldn't walk—I crawled, as near to a crawl as I could manage with my palsied legs. I had to practically drag them along the ground after me. For what seemed an eternity I crawled, through mud that nearly engulfed and suffocated me, through barbed wires that tore at me cruelly and seemed, to my fevered fancy, like red-hot fingers trying to hold

me back. Sometimes I went headlong into holes, at other times I went crashing into tree stumps, but nothing hindered my crawling for long—on and on I went, feeling, hotter and hotter every minute, till at last I began tearing at what remained of my tattered clothes, wrenching bits off as I crawled, and scattering them as one scatters paper in a paper-chase. Anything for coolness—anything to help me reach that crystal-clear water for which I craved."

Pausing for a moment, John Malcolm drew his handkerchief across his brow, as if even now he were experiencing that feverish search, and into the break in his story Pepita came rushing with words and movements.

Up and away from the ranks of her schoolmates, with arrow-like swiftness, she reached her father's side, and threw herself in a compassionate heap beside him.

"Daddy! Oh, you poor dear! How awful!" she cried. "But you *did* find it? You must have found it—or you wouldn't be here now, would you?"

He smiled into her pitying face, and, slipping an arm about her, kept her beside him while he talked on.

"Perhaps it would be truer to say that *it* found *me*," he said, "and if it hadn't done I probably *shouldn't* have survived. During that endless seeming crawl, the moon had disappeared behind heavy clouds, and presently down came the rain in a positive sheet, cooling, reviving. It gave me the desperate

strength to labour on, heavy going though it was, over the sodden ground, with injuries of which I was only partly conscious. There was a grey dawn breaking when at last I slid, exhausted, into a furrow of a rough farm road. I remember thinking that I must sleep, and noticing a blur of buildings not far away just before I closed my eyes. When I opened them again, it was upon a roof over me—not a house, I realized, because I was being jolted pretty painfully in some kind of vehicle. I must have cried out something, I think—although I could hear nothing myself—but suddenly a woman's face, brown and very wrinkled, and framed in a coloured shawl or handkerchief tied under her chin, was bent over mine, and I saw her lips move in speech. But nothing of it penetrated my deafened ears; I only knew that her eyes were very kind and pitiful, and that presently, with the help of another and younger woman, she fed me with what tasted like a weak broth. After that, for what seemed an interminable time, I remember only the endless jolting, and the feeds whenever I roused out of what was, I suppose, as often coma as sleep. At last there came a day when I was lifted out, my blankets were slung on poles, and away I was carried under a marvellously blue sky by four swarthy-looking men, up and up and up a mountain road to a wonderful building that looked like a castle in a fairy tale picture."

"The castle in Spain?" queried Pepita eagerly.

Her father nodded. "The home of your grandfather, Don Felipe d'Alvarez," he confirmed. "And now, having reached the castle, I'm going to ask the lady who made it a haven of refuge for me to continue the story," and he turned his smiling blue eyes confidently on the beautiful Spaniard who had given up home and country for his sake.

"Ah—h—h!" her deep sigh and expressive gesture were eloquent of her remembrance, and the pathos in her rich voice touched the heart of every listener. "If ever a man needed a refuge and ministering hands, *he* did! That poor John Williams! Those refugees from France had done their best for him, but what could it be but a poor best from people who were themselves distressed and worn by the anxieties of flight from the ravages of war. The old woman was Spanish, and having lost her French husband had fled with her children from stricken France to her native village just below the castle, and because they knew that the invalid needed skill and careful nursing, they brought him to us. He was a sight to strike pity into the hardest heart—my poor John Williams. His rescuers had managed to wash him—a little; to tend his wounds—a little; they had no means at their hands to do more. It was a marvel that he had lived at all. They had wrapped him in their rough blankets, having found on him nothing to show his identity but a fragment of clothing

they had preserved, on which one could only make out, through the stains upon it, the name of John Williams, and a tiny mark that might have been a stain or the beginning of another letter. My father was kind; nothing was spared; and I and our servants nursed the stranger back to comparative health; but oh, the weeks, the sad, anxious weeks we had, before strength and hearing and reason returned to him. And after that—ah, the pain of watching his mental anguish, his restlessness, for he could remember nothing—his mind was a blank. What wonder that, tending him for so long and learning to love him, I could not see him wander forth—alone—with none to trouble what became of him. So—after finding a priest at a little distance away to marry us—we returned to the castle to break the news to my father, hoping for his blessing, because he, too, had grown fond of John Williams. But he is of a great pride. He would not forgive. He would not understand that pride of name counts not at all against love. He turned us away from him with hard words.

So, with just a few clothes, a little money, my own jewels and some that my mother had left me, I came with my husband to the England that he longed for, hoping, always hoping, for some clue to his identity, some answer to the ceaseless questioning in his mind. But—nothing happened to ease his restlessness except—the coming of our daughter, our little Pepita.

Ah! she was of a comfort to us both—a heaven-sent joy—till our fast-dwindling means were gone, and then, what anxiety was ours for our little one! My husband was not well enough for work—his head suffered a lot—he could bear so little, you understand. I had sold my jewels—we had almost nothing left—but those of my dear mother——"

"Teresa!" suddenly wailed Lady Denning. "Oh, you *didn't* part with those, did you?"

The head of silky curls, so like Pepita's, was shaken vigorously, as the lovely, vivacious face of the Spanish woman turned on the questioner. "Only to my father, Auntie dear," was the cheery reply. "I couldn't sell *those*—to anyone else. But—I was desperate for my two—my husband and child, and I knew—my mother would have loved them, had she lived. So I sent her jewels to my father, and asked him to *buy* them from me—for *her* sake—to help me in my plight——"

"And—and—oh, mother, go on quickly! Surely he wasn't hard-hearted enough to refuse *that*!" It was Pepita who cut in passionately here.

"No, little one." The mother's smile showed how well she understood her daughter's sympathetic nature. "He sent me a fair price—and a message with it—that he was willing to redeem me from the consequences of my folly if I returned home—alone."

"Teresa!" John Malcolm's eyes, misty with

pain, sought the sparkling ones of his wife. "You never let me know—that."

Her musical laugh tinkled out. "Why should I —then. You would only have worried more and to no purpose. The consequences of my folly"—here her smile was divided between husband and daughter— "were far too precious to give up, even for a father and —a castle in Spain. I only tell you of that message now because it lost its sting long ago, and soon, when Malcolm of Denning, his wife, his daughter, and his aunt go to visit him, my father will be ashamed that he ever sent it."

"I should jolly well think so!" Pepita chimed in again in a rather aggrieved tone. "But tell on, mother. We're all dying to hear the rest. What about the circus bit?"

A cloud shadowed the narrator's face then.

"The circus!" she echoed. "Ah, we were in the depths then, dear people. We were earning nothing, and our little store was melting like snow in the sunshine. And, you see, I had not been trained to work. But I could dance. So we joined a circus troupe, I as dancer, my husband to look after the horses. But the life, the roughness, the people we were amongst! They soon decided us to part with our child for her own sake, because we knew, too, that never, so far as we could see, should we have any chance of educating her or bringing her up in the sphere to which she belonged. But in less than a

year after she had been adopted at Denning Abbey we left the circus because it travelled too far afield from her, and I became a gypsy dancer in the Hippodrome at Calchester, where I received so good a salary that at last, on the death of its proprietor, my husband and I were able to take it over; thus, with our caravan-life spent always in the neighbourhood of our daughter, we felt we had some small share in her without robbing her of the advantages, to gain which we had given her up.

"Ah! but how *often* we have been tempted to give up the struggle, to let selfishness win, and claim her in spite of all; and each time we would hear afresh of the love Linden people bore her, watch her happiness here with her schoolfellows, and fight the temptation—for her good. It was only when we heard that unhappiness had befallen her that I failed. Now, oh thank the good God for it, there is no more need to fight, and my husband and I go no longer with hungry hearts. . . ."

"And I no longer in fear of losing my treasure," Lady Denning put in thankfully, as the speaker paused to beam on the entranced audience; "so perhaps *I* may be allowed to take up the story now."

"Do, Lady Denning!"

"Oh, *do*, please!" came in a clamouring chorus from all about her; so she went on with a deprecating shake of her head.

"They say that confession is good for the soul, so perhaps I had better confess first of all that I was fast becoming a scheming old woman, determined to hold Pepita against all the world if need be; resolved, too, that she should never know that her parental name was in obscurity, if money or imagination could find a way out of the difficulty. Of late I had begun to think of the questions which might naturally be expected to arise when she grew up, and I had even begun, foolish creature that I was, to toy with tales to tell her when that time came; vague tales that I could never have substantiated, but which I fondly believed might satisfy her, coming from me. Often and often has Ella urged me that it would be better to tell her the truth of her adoption, but I would not agree—I shrank from it. I hated to own even to myself that Pepita was not really mine.

"I see now that had I listened to that counsel she would have been spared the dreadful shock she received on Saturday; the knowledge would have been so differently given—I could have smoothed over so much. Still, perhaps then things might not have come to this beautiful conclusion. While her parents knew her to be happy, they would not have interfered. They would have gone on with their renunciation, for her sake, because they would not make an upheaval in her life. Only the news of her flight from school, the suspicion that something was sadly amiss, brought

the anxious mother to me, her endurance at breaking point. But even then she did not come to take Pepita from me, only to make herself known, and beg for a word with her sometimes, for my nephew's sake. She was so anxious for his health; anxiety or agitation were bad for him, you see.

"Missing her and recollecting a talk they had just had together about Pepita, he guessed where his wife had gone, and, fearing he hardly knew what, he crept up to the Abbey after her—for the first time since he had left it for France and the war. He has told you how the sight of his own photograph, as he was then, brought back his memory. I had hung the pictures of my three soldiers all together in the library, because I sat there so often alone, writing or reading, when Pepita was at school. They made me feel—less lonely, their faces looked so natural, so alive, so cheering. But I couldn't have borne them there—without Pepita. Before she came like a ray of sunshine into my darkened life I couldn't bear to look at the pictured faces of those whom I had lost. I had had to put them away—precious possessions for always, of course, but not ones over which I could gloat; until the new love came into my life.

"Then—it was just before Pepita's first Christmas at Denning—I suddenly realized how full life had become once more. I had had such occupied months watching over her, planning for her, and the thought

of busy years of just such sweet occupation uplifted me, made me strong again to take up all the duties I had been neglecting. I brought out my photographs with the feeling that I could face them again with a good conscience. As my menfolk had shielded and fought for me, so now I, in my turn, had someone to shield and fight for, and I vowed to carry on in my way as worthily as they had done in theirs. Now you know just what the coming of Pepita did for me. It gave me courage, helped me to triumph over myself, over a grief that was making me selfish, forgetful of the sorrows of others. Soon everything seemed to revolve round the welfare, the doings and sayings of the dependent little creature whose home the Abbey had become. I am afraid all of us there were inclined to be over-indulgent"—Lady Denning smilingly shook her head at Pepita—"but quite pardonably, I think. We were influenced by the thought that her natural protectors had neither cared for nor wanted her, else why should they have given away such a healthy, attractive specimen of babyhood.

"At first we were all on the watch, fully convinced that our charge of her would be but a temporary one, that no relative of hers could possibly part with her for any length of time; but as the months passed and no one came to claim her, she grew into our lives. We almost forgot that she was Malcolm only by adoption, and were lulled into a sense of security

regarding her. But, even so, I let two years go by before I ventured to set any kind of seal upon my adoption of her. It was a sore trial of my patience, I can assure you. I did so want everything settled about her future, so far as anyone's future *can* be settled. But I schooled myself not to act hastily, just in *case*! Though I wouldn't even own to myself what that 'in case' might imply. However, at the end of two years my granddaughter-by-adoption was as firmly established, as a will could make her, as heiress of Denning. That will has now had to be altered, of course, but happily only in her father's favour, so, in years to come, Pepita will again be heiress of Denning, God willing, not by adoption, but in her own right."

Lady Denning was interrupted at this point by a spontaneous cheer. Knowing what they did of Pepita's love for her beautiful home, her schoolfellows were impelled by their enthusiasm to show her just what they felt about the security that now surrounded her, and she repaid them with her most radiant smiles.

But after a moment or two, expectant faces and another attentive silence urged Lady Denning on to finish her part of the story.

"Well," she continued, "when matters had been arranged to my entire satisfaction, I dismissed once and for all any idea of anyone claiming Pepita, and the years went by in a great peace and happiness

until about twelve months ago. Then, like an earthquake upheaving the very foundations on which I had built my new happiness, came the news from Mrs. Jack, the Linden postmistress, that stealthy inquiries had drifted through to her about Pepita. I say stealthy, because she could only say that they came through roundabout channels, though they were believed to have originated from some caravan dwellers, but whether of the gypsy type or not she had no idea."

Mr. and Mrs. Malcolm exchanged amused glances here, and the former put in laughingly:

"Which promptly made you suspicious of all roadsters, Romany and otherwise, I suppose, Auntie?"

Lady Denning nodded her head at him with mock fierceness.

"It certainly did, John," she retorted, "even though my wildest imaginings could not connect Pepita with actual gypsies. But Ella and I had no peace of mind from that time onwards. We dreaded Pepita being out of our sight; we shivered over the prospect of her being kidnapped, and of my having no redress, because she had only been taken by the people with a natural right to her. We 'died daily' in the fear that she belonged to folk who had simply foisted her on to me to be kept educated until she was of wage-earning age. I would lie awake night after night trying to think of some legal barricade of defence that could be built up against anyone wishing

to take her from me. The idea of bribery or of fighting the case out in court set me calculating like any miser my income from all sources. Oh yes! You and Teresa would have found me a formidable antagonist, John, had you come, wolf-like, to steal the lamb from its fold! But my chief fear, I think, was lest any claimant for Pepita might wean her from me with promises of attractions that the quiet environment of Denning could never hope to compete with, and I fidgeted and bewildered her with questions and vague cautions till she must have had doubts of my sanity, I believe.

"But the mystery that was riddling my nerves was to deepen. Ella brought me tidings recently of fresh inquirers—a couple of ferrety females, to quote indignant Mrs. Jack." Here Lady Denning's glance of mischievous amusement found the blushing Guinevere and Kathleen. "It seemed the last straw added to the burden of my anxiety. Who could they be? Why were the inquiries so persistent yet so furtive? Who *was* Pepita? The questions flooded my mind, only to leave me at last more than ever fixed in my determination to fight for Pepita against all comers."

"Hurrah for plucky old Gran!" Pepita impulsively sprang from her father's side to pat her girlhood's protector affectionately, everybody smiling sympathetically on both of them. "But what a time you've had of it, poor dear! No wonder I haven't

been able to make head or tail of you and Ella lately. Thank goodness all the mystery and bother are over. I shall be able to trot back here after hols now without a care in the world, knowing that you are as happy as a queen. *Dear* old Gran!"

"And I," John Malcolm's voice was whimsical as his searching eyes found Guinevere and Kathleen amongst the crowd, "shall no longer, I trust, be an object of suspicion because I happen to possess a caravan."

Encouraged by the teasing in his glance, Guinevere once again essayed defence of herself and her chum.

"Oh, but, Mr. Malcolm," she cried, red-faced, but smiling at him nevertheless, "*do* believe now that Jerry really *did* run away, won't you? It's true that Kath and I *were* wanting a peep inside the van, but we didn't do any harm in it—we really were trying to put it tidy when you caught us."

He nodded, smiling back broadly. "It's all right, my dear girls. I gave you credit for that later in my own mind, when I realized that only a peccadillo of Jerry's could account for a wholesale smash of china."

The listeners to this little dialogue were quite naturally looking their complete mystification.

"It seems to me," was Venus's dryly amused comment, "that there are a good many side-issues to the wonderful story we have heard, but perhaps these had better be kept for schoolgirls' ears only.

Certainly they must be kept from mine. I really cannot be forced into scolding *anybody* on such a happy day as this."

"Hear, hear!" seconded the caravanner with a solemnity belied by his twinkling eyes. "In fact, Miss Vene, it's such a marvellously happy occasion that I feel it should be celebrated in some pleasant fashion. May I suggest that the whole school should attend a very special matinée at Calchester Hippodrome next Saturday?"

But before Venus could get in either a yea or a nay, the whole school had accepted for itself with a roar of enthusiasm.

That she had no intention of vetoing the wholesale and sweeping acceptance was evident enough, however, from the indulgent smile with which she addressed the girls when the racket had died down.

"After that," she said, "thanks from me to Mr. Malcolm will seem superfluous; none the less, they are sincerely offered, and as I suppose some little recognition of all the wonderful happenings will be expected by you from me, too, I propose that the rest of to-day be given over to freedom; in short, prep bell shall not ring to-night."

Another roar of elation here was spiced with laughter that testified to schoolgirl appreciation of Venus's parodying, and the Malcolms, looking on happily at the excellent relations that so plainly existed

between principal and pupils, knew that such a pleasant state of affairs was due to the easy charm and absence of stiffness of the former. There was nothing pedagogue-ish about her, nothing to awe or repel; she was just a clear-visioned, intellectual woman with the happiness and welfare of each girl at heart, and therein lay the secret of her success with every one of them.

"I mentioned freedom," she went on, still with whimsicality lurking in her eyes and at the corners of her mouth, "and I know that to schoolgirls a speech means the very opposite of freedom, so I am going to delay you for only a few more minutes, after which your high spirits may find any vent that is in keeping with the traditions of Redlands." After a pause to allow of their applause, she resumed with a sweetly serious air, "I am sure you will all agree with me that never in its annals can the school have known such joyful hearts as are here to-day. We all rejoice with Pepita that she has found a mother and father; we rejoice with her parents that the sacrifice they made for her years ago has had such a happy outcome. It seems almost too wonderful to be true that their selflessness should have led to such a marvellous reunion.

"Some people say that the age of miracles is past. I am sure that Lady Denning cannot think so. It must seem nothing short of a miracle to her to have

had her nephew given back from the dead, as it were. Girls, who *dare* say that our lives are not guided and ordered? Not one of us will ever be able to forget such a happy-ever-after ending to an anxious week-end. Just think how easily, thirteen years ago, things might have gone more awry than they already were!

"Pepita might have been left in the charge of someone else, someone who would not have adopted her as Lady Denning did; she might have been handed on to an institution and have been lost trace of for ever by her parents. Then—coming to the present, as I understand the situation so far—the unravelling of all the tangled threads regarding Pepita and her people was due to schoolgirl curiosity, so even curiosity has its uses at times. But don't decide from that remark," she hastened to add with another smile, "that I am anxious for you all to turn into amateur detectives; you would probably create more mysteries than you solved. No, what I really want you to think about is this—of the far-reaching effects that your conduct may have upon yourselves and others. Ill-considered actions may so easily result in lifelong unhappiness for someone. So, girls, I appeal to you, as your friend, to always think well before you act in future and to study each other's feelings. And now, we really must have three cheers for the five people most concerned in the wonderful story we have just heard."

To which deafening acclamation Pepita and the four adults whose lives centred around her laughingly bowed acknowledgment.

Out in the playing-fields a little later Pepita took a short cut through the maze of questioning in which she and Guinevere found themselves involved.

Mounting the gate and pulling her rival up beside her, she surpassed herself in a lively harangue to the interested Redlandsites *en masse*.

"Friends all—more or less," she cried, flashing one of her wickedly brilliant glances around, "before my eardrums are cracked, my tongue is twisted into knots, and my brain is muzzy, I'm going to take what is certainly my first, and what will probably be my last, chance of speechifying. You see here before you the two Greeks whose tugs of war in the past have, I believe, afforded you quite a lot of entertainment—of sorts. Well, you needn't be afraid of being done out of it in the future by the Greeks falling on each other's necks. Neither Vere nor I could stand a tame finish like that. We shall always scrum like a couple of—er—Greeks. The tugs are bound to go on. *She'll* try to give *me* best in games and *I* shall try to top-dog *her* in class, so what'll yet happen in Dormie Six, goodness only knows! But the tugs will be with a difference—neither of us will let the other down. Eh, old thing?"

And as, in response to the roguish challenge that

yet held a promise of friendliness, Guinevere smilingly slapped Pepita on the back, another cheer, this time of positively rowdy proportions, broke out.

It must be confessed that the prospect of the outing for the following Saturday was not conducive to good work at Redlands during the days that preceded it. Fortunately, however, though excitement had played havoc with wits, those same wits were canny enough to keep their owners on the right side of mistresses by an unusual number of good conduct marks. As Jill said with a sigh of relief, when Friday finished up with no cancelling of the morrow's pleasure, "What we lost on the swings we picked up on the roundabouts. My goodness, though, I don't believe any of us have had two ideas in our heads this week, and I really believe we've all been too scared of explosions to be anything but mouselike in behaviour. But everything has been too exciting for words."

But there comes a time when excitement must find a vent. Certainly that of the next day had no paralysing effect upon tongues; the motor buses which Mr. Malcolm had chartered for the conveyance of the Redlandsites to Calchester being filled with elated creatures whose chattering could only be likened to that of magpies. But as no bridle was set upon the animated tongues, it was to be inferred that the mistresses themselves were under the spell of so unusual an outing, and complacent accordingly; even Venus

having accepted the invitation to which Lady Denning had added one to tea in the Abbey grounds on the return journey, as a glorious wind-up.

It was to a performance of no mean degree that John Malcolm had bidden the school. An animal lover, he had a way with, and an understanding of, horses in particular that had resulted in some very attractive features being introduced into his show, for, apart from having secured clever equestrians among his troupe of performers, he had himself trained the trick horses, whose sagacity charmed and amazed all beholders. These alone would have redeemed from the ordinary the place of amusement he had taken over some years before, but among many other features were included some expert trapezists, a couple of performing Japs, and an illusionist, whose seemingly magic powers defied solution. Popular as were these attractions, however, the bi-weekly appearances of the Hippodrome proprietor's wife drew the biggest crowds, her wonderful dancing as Perdita, the Spanish gypsy, allied to her unusual beauty, taking the audience by storm. Then, too, Calchester had somehow become aware of the fact that the white-haired man known as John Williams was a derelict of the Great War. So sympathy played a great part in the patronage bestowed upon the Hippodrome.

But for the packed house of that particular Saturday afternoon, those responsible for the show were

totally unprepared. Shortly after the doors were opened, John Malcolm's manager came to him in the quiet business room where he always awaited his wife.

"Never saw anything like it before, sir," he blurted out excitedly. "Hardly an inch of standing room left, and a crowd still surging outside clamouring to get in. The sooner your party turns up the better. If a whisper got round outside that all those seats are waiting to be filled, I believe they'd be rushed. You see, sir, all Calchester's got wind now of the —er—romance, so to speak; knows who you've turned out to be and all that."

John Malcolm's keen gaze glued itself with mock severity on his manager.

"Jones," he said, wagging his head reproachfully, "you've been chin-wagging."

Mr. Jones mopped his hot face. "I swear I haven't, sir," he protested. "At least, not more than I could help. Couldn't tell lies when I was asked if it was all true, you know. The local papers are all full of it to-day, you see."

John Malcolm grinned even while he grumbled. "I suppose they are, but I've been too occupied to think about them. Trust the Press to get busy nosing into people's concerns. The Abbey has been swarming with reporters all the week, though *I* managed to dodge them all. You see, Jones, I've only just got my bearings again in life,

as you might say, and I hardly feel like being gaped at everywhere I go, as if I were one of the seven wonders of the world."

Jones gave a chuckle. "Lor' bless you, sir, you mustn't mind being the hero of the hour in Calchester, where everyone knows you. Folks are as pleased as Punch about everything. They've heard that this is to be a kind of star performance for your daughter and her school, and they're turning up wholesale, especially the women. It's her they want to see to-day most of all. Not out of idle curiosity, mind you. It's sympathy with, and loyalty to, all three of you, sir. That's what it is."

There was no doubt about that. John Malcolm was presently coaxed from his retreat by his wife, whose opening of its door let in a volume of sound that caused him to lift his eyes from his desk in sudden surprise.

"The people outside!" she smiled. "They are cheering Pepita. The girls have just arrived. Come, John, you *must* come and peep from the window at the back of the balcony. Nobody will see you."

And the pair were just in time to witness a scene that put all self-consciousness out of their minds.

Surging about the schoolgirl-laden buses, interested Calchester folk interlarded their cheers with calls for "Miss Malcolm! Miss Pepita Malcolm!"

"My hat! It might be a revolution! What do they want me for? To guillotine me?" Pepita's

black eyes, saucerlike at the uproar, sought those of her chums as she rose from her seat to alight.

"Silly!" she heard Guinevere say as she was propelled doorwards by many urging hands. "They've heard about everything and are giving you a ripping reception. Climb up the luggage ladder to the top of the bus and bow."

But Pepita wasn't even given time to do her own climbing; literally pushed up by her chums, she scrambled to her feet on the bus-top with only breath and wits enough to call out to the crowd smiling and waving up at her.

"I say, it's awf'lly kind of you all. *Hasn't* everything happened gloriously? Thanks ever so for being so jolly."

Then she cluttered down again and bolted for the Hippodrome entrance, while renewed and prolonged cheering told how well her appearance and girlish acknowledgment had pleased the romance-loving crowd.

"Anyone would think you were royalty arriving," muttered Jill in her ear as the girls filed into their places above the big arena under the high-domed roof of the Hippodrome; for necks were craning to watch the schoolgirl procession, and there sounded the sibilance of whispering and the hum of murmuring, as eager eyes picked out Pepita, so unmistakably her mother's daughter. Smiling faces beamed upon her wherever she looked.

"Heavens! I feel more like a Punch and Judy

show. I shall crawl under the seat in a minute," she said under her breath to Jill, who grinned sceptically, however, serenely aware that Pepita was thoroughly enjoying and returning with interest the smiles of all the sympathizers in her newly-found happiness.

But the warm-hearted readers of the Malcolm story had not foregathered that day to stop at cheers and smiles alone; and if their reception of the fare provided was more vociferous than usual, it was nothing to the outburst that greeted the 'star' of the Hippodrome, whose dancing was to close the afternoon's programme.

Spellbound, Pepita watched her beautiful counterpart give the spectacular gypsy dances, but a thrill ran through her when at last her mother appeared in Spanish costume and danced to the tinkle of castanets, in a whirl of rich red silks and flowing mantilla.

"No *wonder*, Pep," breathed Jill rapturously, "that you're such a good dancer; it must have been born in you. Your mother is marvellous."

Pepita's undertone in response was as vigorous as her nod of agreement with the last sentence. "She's a dream! I'll never, never be able to dance like that. And to think, just to think, that she's my *mother*!"

She was given reason to be still more thrilled and proud during the next few minutes. Just as Mrs. Malcolm was bowing her acknowledgment of the ovation accorded her, as if by magic, flowers and other

offerings appeared in the hands of the enthusiastic audience, and in a minute or two the recipient was laughingly endeavouring to dodge the perfect hail of gifts. Then, ere she could recover from that surprise, a dainty child, the daughter of Calchester's mayor, was lifted into the ring to curtsey gracefully and offer the dancer a lovely bouquet.

Looking almost overcome, she bowed again and again to her well-wishers. But not yet was she to be allowed to depart.

"Mr. Malcolm too," clamoured the delighted audience. "Lady Denning! Miss Pepita!"

"Off you go, Pepper, to swell the family group," laughed Jill, and Pepita was shunted along, willy-nilly, to where Lady Denning sat with Miss Vene.

"Come along, Gran, there's no help for it," she chuckled. "Into the arena we must go, like the gladiators of old. I only hope we shan't see an undignified spectacle of daddy being *dragged* in. He'll hate appearing, poor dear."

The 'poor dear' did. But no man, however nerve-racked and reserved, could have held out against the kindliness and goodwill which was being extended to him and his. So, for the first time, he showed himself in the ring into which he had put so much talent, to take his stand, with the three others, and smile and bow in response to the plaudits that filled the lofty building.

There was relief as well as laughter in his face when the last of the people who had penetrated to his retreat with congratulations left the four breathing-space.

"Phew! I've had enough of the limelight to last me for a long time," he said. "I could face lots of things easier than such a bombardment of eyes."

Lady Denning shook a quizzical head at him. "No more hermit crab habits for you, John," she said. "You'll have to come out of your shell; but you'll soon get used to it."

"That's right, Gran, we won't let him do any disappearing tricks, will we?" teased Pepita. "*I* think it was ripping, being stared at and cheered by everybody!"

"Then it's a very good thing," retorted her father, pulling one of her curls, "that your mother and I are selling the Hippodrome, or we should have you running away from school to queen it in the ring. By the way, Pep, my dear," as a sudden thought struck him, "isn't it time you found a less venerable title than 'Gran' for a great-aunt?"

"Never!" cried Pepita firmly. "It'll be 'Gran' to the end of the chapter—won't it?" she appealed to Lady Denning.

The lady nodded, smiling serenely. "'Gran' to the end of the chapter, my love," she responded. "You see, John"—she laid affectionate hands on his shoulders—"I'm claiming you as a son now, so why alter the title I love?"

Bending his tall head, he kissed her. "Heaven helping me, dear, I'll try to make up to you for all the hungry years," he said gently. "I can't tell you how glad I am that you had Pepita to help you through them. That thought will always be a happy one to Teresa and me."

The Spanish woman's eloquent glance was warm with affection for her newly-found relative.

"Our little Pepita," she murmured. "She was a loan from two sad hearts to one as heavy. How little we all dreamed with what a wealth of happiness that loan would be repaid!" and she, too, kissed the wrinkled face on which joy and peace of mind had already laid smoothing fingers.

Calchester was not destined to have the monopoly of the Malcolm excitements that day. Linden villagers, not to be outdone by the townsfolk, welcomed the laden buses with flags and cheers as they passed through to the Abbey.

"I wonder, Daddy," Pepita said thoughtfully, when she and Jill strolled about the grounds after tea, hanging devotedly to Mr. Malcolm's arms, "I wonder if any sort of subconscious thingumijig made you fix on Linden and the Abbey for me? Did anything about the village strike you as at all familiar?"

"No, strange as it may seem of the place in which I spent so much of my boyhood," her father replied, "I can't say that it aroused any sense of actual familiarity. The way it acted upon my subconscious

self was this: I felt rested—as if I had found a place I had been looking for—that was all. And you must remember I didn't approach the Abbey at all; your mother, who was entirely a stranger to it, left you here."

Pepita nodded, her eyes seeking the distant porch as if to visualize the scene enacted on that long ago June night.

"And, of course, you hid yourself away so, poor dear, that there wasn't much chance of anybody in the village recognizing you, I suppose?" Her tone was soft with the pity of it all. "And yet, Daddy, Gran and Ella knew you in a moment."

"Ah!" his exclamation was eloquent. "Their eyes were sharpened by love, you see, Pep. And my real self had come back. To the villagers, when they *did* get glimpses of me, I suppose I was just a queer-mannered chap with white hair and an eternal question in my eyes. The eyes are the window of the mind, you know, Pep, and mine was a tortured one."

Two tremendous squeezes told him just how much his escort was sympathizing, and a minute or so of silence followed before Jill could trust her voice to say lightheartedly, "But it won't be again, Mr. Malcolm; not *ever* again."

His blue eyes flashed down at her a brilliantly happy glance.

"Not ever again, Jill, with longing and loneliness things of the past!" he cried fervently.

CHAPTER IX

THE CASTLE IN SPAIN

"WHAT *do* you feel like, Pep?" It was the last day of the term, and packing was proceeding apace throughout Redlands, but nowhere with such excitement as in Dormie Six, where, as ever, Pepita was the human centrepiece.

It was Guinevere who asked the question, one that attracted the keenest of interest, all eyes travelling instantly to the radiant face of the girl in whose packing this time everybody somehow felt she must have a hand.

Pepita sat back on her heels and roguishly surveyed her one-time enemy.

"As though I shall explode with joy, so look out for yourself," she replied.

But Guinevere's thoughts were a trifle too deep at the moment for the nonsense to which she had grown so accustomed. She nodded gently at Pepita, her blue-grey eyes very soft and shining.

"It must all seem too wonderful to be true," she said dreamily. "To have lived through fourteen whole years thinking yourself an orphan, and suddenly to find you've a mother and father! Such dears, too, and so handsome, both of them. You've no idea

what I feel about it, Pep—so *very* glad for you and for them and your Gran too. You've all come into the rippingest kind of fortune, haven't you?"

There were warm glances on Guinevere as she spoke. Every looker-on knew that the speech rang true and meant a lot coming from a girl of Guinevere's reserved type. Aware, too, that she had had to get the better of a naturally jealous and imperious disposition, they thought all the more of her for it. That there would always on occasions be an element of friction between her and teasing Pepita they never doubted, but sympathy on one side and careless generosity on the other had built a bridge upon which two self-willed characters could meet fairly amicably; they would agree to be friends instead of fiends, as Pepita tersely put it one day. And Guinevere's altered attitude towards the school favourite had won her something for herself, having changed the rather lukewarm friendship of Kathleen into one of sterling worth. An affectionate, easy-tempered girl with a desire to be friendly towards everybody, Kathleen had been repelled at times by Guinevere's bad qualities, had resented the bitterness of a newcomer towards an old and tried schoolfellow; since the upset had subsided, however, she revelled in an atmosphere of toleration and comparative peace, and Guinevere had eventually gained a really devoted chum.

So now she got an appreciative thump between her shoulders from Kathleen, as Pepita merrily returned the compliment with :

"All through you, Vere m'dear. Nothing like jolly old curiosity for helping the world along. If it hadn't been for yours about my lurid past, a skeleton would still have been kicking its heels in the Denning cupboard, rattling its bones to the disturbance of Gran and Ella and your humble."

"And the poor dear caravanners would still be wearing themselves and Jerry out trailing after you between here and Linden," chipped in Jill.

"Instead of which the four of us most concerned with the van are going to do the trailing with Jerry to-day, and find them and Gran at the end of the trail." Pepita's voice matched the sudden softness in her glowing black orbs.

"Lucky pigs, with a caravan journey ahead instead of a train squash!" came a lightly envious remark. "I bet you'll manage to lose the way and make the trek longer."

Pepita chuckled. "We won't get the chance," she retorted. "Jerry knows the way too well, and the time it takes too. So we won't be able to play up on that journey. Daddy says that Jerry could do it in his sleep."

But with four lively girls presently chivvying him along, Jerry had no opportunity of going to sleep

en route; in fact, the marvel was that he didn't try bolting from all the unfamiliar hubbub behind him. However, beyond giving his ears overtime work to do with their rather nervous flipping back and forth, the chatter and songs and laughter that enlivened the journey seemed in no way to disturb him.

It had been Pepita's bright idea, this jogging journey of joy in sharp contrast to her unhappy flight of a few weeks before, and nothing would satisfy her but that Guinevere, Kathleen and Jill should make it with her and spend a night at Denning before proceeding onwards to their respective homes. So once again had John Malcolm and his wife taken the old familiar road to Redlands in the caravan, though with what different feelings can well be imagined.

"What about making Jerry and Co. over to me, Daddy?" Pepita saucily suggested when, the trek safely accomplished, a merry party sat at tea. "Caravanning is topping. Jill and I are bent on being simple-lifers when she comes to stay, later on in the hols."

Mr. Malcolm laughed; already the youthful quartette noticed with joyfulness that the look of mental strain had vanished from his eyes, his brow had ceased to furrow worriedly, and certain nervous gestures were no more to be seen.

"Right-ho!" he agreed jovially. "I'll make the whole concern over with pleasure. I've had enough

of the simple life myself to last me for the rest of mine. Oh, and by the way, Pep, old girl, your mother and I have something else to hand over to you," and he gave her, from a breast-pocket, a flat packet of something clean and crisp, guarded by a thin elastic band.

"Five-pound notes!" she shrilled, her eyes wide—first on them, and then on her parents.

"Count them," smiled her father, and, with everybody looking on interestedly, Pepita did.

"Twenty!" she breathed, half incredulously. "That's a hundred pounds! Mine? Did you say they were *mine*?"

Her father nodded. "The birthday and Christmas presents we've never been able to give you all rolled into one—a little share of the Hippodrome sale. Buy what you like with it."

Pepita's eyes sparkled. "You dears!" she cried. "Thank you ever so. Gran, whatever shall I do with so much money of my own?"

Lady Denning had been looking on with happily indulgent eyes. "A visit to a castle in Spain will doubtless suggest—er—adornments," she replied, in a dryly amused tone.

"Oh-h-h!" Pepita was ecstatic. "Then we're *really* going? It's all like a fairy tale."

For answer Mrs. Malcolm lightly tossed another and more bulky parcel into her daughter's lap.

"Listen, Pepita darling, before you open it," she bade. "From time to time I have written from the Hippodrome to my old nurse, who has been faithful to me all through my banishment from my home. Yesterday, when we were in Calchester to settle matters, a letter came from her enclosing this note from my father. But I must read it to you, as you do not yet know my language.

"Teresa, my daughter" (she translated), *"your father is old, lonely and failing in health. Perhaps that knowledge will soften your judgment of his past hardness towards you and your husband, John Williams. Juanita tells me that you have also a daughter. Teresa, I want you all—the three of you. Come to me. Let my pleading be done by a sight of your mother's jewels which I send back to you—together with money for travelling—for the little Pepita, of whom Juanita speaks. My daughter—come soon!*

Your father,
Felipe d'Alvarez."

"Oh, mother, you've told him that we'll go?" Impetuously, warm-hearted Pepita spoke, forgetful for the moment, in her pity for the lonely grandfather whom she had never seen, of the gift he had sent her.

Mrs. Malcolm nodded, tears glistening in her lovely eyes.

"We'll start to-morrow, love," she said.

"Gran too?" flashed Pepita.

"Gran—and Ella—too," amended her mother. "Ella must be in the reunion there as well as here, and my dear old Juanita will want to see her, you know. Now open your parcel, dear."

In a gleaming cascade Pepita let the precious contents run through her slender fingers.

"My grandmother's jewels!" she said, her eyes doing their best to outshine the gems. "Vere, *what* a lot of treasure you've dug up for me!"

And over the glittering heap—in the presence of the best treasure of all, a father and a mother—the hands of the rivals of Redlands met.

So it was a very happy and reluctantly departing trio that made the temporary break with the lively Pepita next morning. The quartette had insisted on trundling along in the caravan to Linden station, running the gauntlet of many smiles en route from the villagers, to whom plodding Jerry had long been a familiar sight, though never in the charge of such a roguish driver as now held his reins, never with ringing girlish laughter issuing from his swaying equipage.

"I hardly know whether I'm on my head or my heels," Pepita told her friends, as they presently awaited the train. "*Can* it be true that I shall be at this station again this afternoon, setting off to a castle in Spain? It doesn't sound real—castles in Spain never are real, you know. Pinch me, somebody, *do*!"

It was Jill who obliged, and with a thoroughness that convinced her chum of complete wakefulness.

"*Yours* will be real enough, never fear, Pepper," she cried. "And I expect you'll find it much more exciting than the ones over here ; sort of primitive and all that, you know. You'll feel positively mediæval, I'm sure, with the surroundings all so different too. What heaps you'll have to tell at Redlands next term ! You *will* turn up all right, won't you ? My great worry is that your grandfather will persuade you all to stay on and winter there once he gets you."

Pepita blew out her carmine cheeks in a considering way at this idea, but her head was very soon shaken decidedly.

"No wintering in mediæval castles for this child," she said, "so you can make your mind easy on that score, Jill, old girl. Gracious ! I should be bored stiff, especially with only grown-ups in it. Besides, I don't feel at all sure that my grandfather and I are going to hit it together ; one can tell he's fearfully high-handed by the way he treated poor Mummy and Daddy for so many years."

"But he sounds awf'lly sorry for that in his letter." It was Guinevere who spoke now ; having suffered the pangs of remorse herself, she could feel keenly for another in a like plight.

"Oh yes ! I quite believe he is, and I'm sorry he's lonely and unhappy," was Pepita's swift rejoinder.

"Only—I'm wondering if getting his own way directly he was ready to make it up with them will make him want it in other things. For instance, I suppose he'll object to Mummy leaving again to come back here: but she must. Daddy will want her and so shall I."

"Of *course*!" chorused her friends.

"And Daddy will *have* to be here mostly," Pepita went on. "He's heir of Denning now, you see, and dear old Gran is looking forward to an easier time, with a man to see after everything again. We've had some jolly hols away together, she and Ella and I, but Gran has never had much real peace—there was always estate business cropping up; there were letters to answer, matters to settle. Now she'll be able to have *real* holidays. That is, if Don Grandpa doesn't make upsets. Think of me wielding my wiliest wiles on a Spanish inquisitor. But if he doesn't know anything more of the English language than I know of Spanish at present, we shall be able to abuse each other to our heart's content if we fall out" —and Pepita laughed elfishly.

"You—be—careful—*not* to fall out with him, Pep!" Jill accentuated the warning with a portentous nod. "He's sure to have a dungeon to shove you into if you're obstreperous, and he *might* even have a torture chamber. So look out for yourself. I should hate to see you come back with all your spirit broken and your thumbs pulled out of joint."

Kathleen pealed with laughter. "*Pep's* spirit broken!" she gurgled, as soon as she could do it intelligibly. "Ho! ho! it's more likely to be Don Thingummy's."

Dimples working in Jill's cheeks belied an attempt at solemnity.

"I believe you're right, Kath," she agreed. "My fears are groundless, I feel sure. I prophesy that the Don will have no backbone left by the time Pep has been at the castle a week! She'll have twisted him round her little finger."

Then, as the train ran in, she added: "Well, we wish you luck at the job, Pepper, old thing."

And Pepita's last impression of the travellers was of three mischievously friendly faces peering from a carriage window and three little fingers being waggled suggestively in the wind.

Jogging quietly back behind Jerry suited her admirably in that it gave her time to think over the great change that had come into her life.

Everything had happened with such startling suddenness that as yet she had found it difficult to realize the precious possession of a mother and father. Her first waking thought o' mornings was still one of fear that only a dream had fashioned them; but each new throb of joy in their reality that full wakefulness brought established them more firmly in her affections, so that her chief marvel was that she should not have

sensed somehow their presence in her neighbourhood. True, she had never seen her mother until the eventful day of the revelations, but she remembered now how strangely attracted she had been by the face of the caravanner that day on the cliffs. She had the clue now to the expressions that had chased in swift succession across it as he had gazed at, and backed away from, her—amaze, when such close range revealed her as, not merely resembling, but the absolute living image of, her mother, desperate longing to claim her, grief that he must not, fear lest his will should weaken and undo the sacrifice of years. It was that fear which had made his departure so precipitate, so queerly abrupt. At the recollection of it and her own puzzlement, a little smile played upon the lips ever ready to part in mirth.

"What's the joke, girlie ?"

A head had appeared suddenly over the top of a hedge that screened the domain of the Abbey's bailiff from the lane Pepita was traversing.

Jerry having halted on his own at sound of the familiar voice, Pepita laughed up into her father's face.

"You and I, Daddy. I say, if you've finished with Mr. Williams, let's jog home together."

"Right-ho !" His tone was boyishly eager. "Move on to the field-gate ; I'll be out in two ticks."

His face showed plainly as they met his pleasure in her company, and her eyes dwelt on him with an

understanding softness as he perched himself on the front of the house on wheels which had been his home for so long. With a rare intuition in one so young, she divined how her breezy chumminess helped him. Where a certain awkwardness and reserve might have marred the relationship so recently revealed, her jolly schoolgirl way stepped in and cleared away any nerve-ridden atmosphere for him. Already there was a comradeship between them that charmed the three women so anxiously watching his recovery from nervous tension and shock.

"Now, the why and wherefore of the 'you and I' joke, old lady," he demanded to know.

Pepita's gaze was reminiscent.

"It wasn't a joke for either of us—at the time, Daddy, though I can't help smiling now when I think of it," she told him. "I was frightfully puzzled, and *you* looked—yes, you really *did* look scared to death that day on the cliff when you thought I was Mummy dressed in her dancing gypsy rig."

"Scared, begad, yes!" His vivid blue eyes came round to her quickly. "I was nearly a kidnapper of my own daughter in that minute, Pep. How I kept my hands from clutching you I don't know."

"Poor old Daddy!" The words were a caress to the man so long deprived of his child. "And just fancy! I thought that either you were crazy or that

I had suddenly become a freak of some sort." Here Pepita's clear laugh trilled out so infectiously that his deep one was soon doing a bass accompaniment to it.

Reverting to that day of strange happenings after a minute or two, she said: "And a little while afterwards, Daddy; you know, when Vere dared me to that swim and I got cramp. You looked—as if you could have killed her."

"Felt like it too," was the grimly-clipped retort. "The hussy! endangering your life in that fashion! Supposing I hadn't been there—that she couldn't have kept you above water!"

"But you *were* there, you see, Daddy dear!" Pepita's soft reminder was like oil on the troubled waters of nervous excitement that still so easily swamped his calm.

"Yes, thank God!" He was quieter at once, but the tremor in his voice kept Pepita silent for a space. When she spoke again she skilfully avoided the past.

"I've never seen Gran and Ella so gloriously excited as they are about the Spanish visit," she cried. "Ella has always hated the sea, but now I really think wild horses wouldn't keep her off it. As for Gran, Daddy, quite a dozen years have fallen off her since all the happiness came."

"Bless her! Bless them both!" exclaimed her father fervently. "Your mother and I can never be grateful enough to them for all the care they've

shown you. They deserve all the affection we two and you can give them."

"Rather!" She nodded a vigorous emphasis, her eyes shining on him. "I love to see them so happy. Ella is awf'lly thrilled at the idea of seeing a Spanish don and his castle. I do wonder what she and Gran will make of him?"

"I *think* they'll like him," Mr. Malcolm said, "if only because he was so kind to me before he decided that I'd betrayed his hospitality by carrying off his daughter. I haven't got over the surprise of her marrying me *yet*. What she saw in a poor wreck like me to show such devotion to I can't imagine."

"*I* can!" Pepita stoutly averred. "You look such a ripping good sort, you know, Daddy. *I* somehow liked you that day on the cliffs, though I couldn't have explained exactly why."

"Then you'll spare a corner of your heart for the man who was good to me when I was down and out, won't you, Pep dear?"

"Depends on how he behaves in future," was her saucy qualification.

But John Malcolm, looking into her merry face, was no more troubled by misgivings than were the three girls who had just left her. He had no fear of any friction between his high-spirited daughter and her Spanish grandsire, fire-eater though that old gentleman might be. So it was in great good humour

that he presently helped with the backing of the caravan into the big old coach-house that was to be its resting-place for several weeks, and sent Jerry rollicking round the paddock that was to be *his* holiday exchange for dusty roads.

Pepita found the Spanish travel more of an Arabian Nights' affair than even her vivid imagination had led her to anticipate. The southern blood in her responded in a way she had never dreamed of to all the colourful beauty of her mother's country. She was surprised that, far from feeling an alien to it, she was conscious of an 'at home' sense in spite of its unfamiliarity. Her heart warmed to its picturesque inhabitants as though she were coming home to countrymen and countrywomen, and Mrs. Malcolm, eagerly watching her for impressions, felt her own homecoming made all the more joyful by her daughter's enthusiasm.

Excitement increased by leaps and bounds in every one of the travellers as the journey neared its end. Immediately upon receipt of her father's pathetic letter, Mrs. Malcolm had sent him the news of her husband's recovery and identity, and of the speedy start from Denning which would be made in answer to the appeal. A cabled message later had told him just when to expect his visitors, but for the welcome accorded them as their big open car wound up through the mountain village clustered about the

sunny slopes on which the castle stood, like a gleaming white sentinel over its safety, they were totally unprepared.

That the peasantry among whom Mrs. Malcolm had grown up saw surprisingly little difference in her after the lapse of years, seemed evident from their delighted smiles as they waved her onward to her castle home, and their wide, shining eyes for, and animated chatter about, her youthful replica, made it plain to Pepita, without the aid of any interpreter, that they greeted her as a worthy descendant of the house of d'Alvarez.

The biggest surprise, however, awaited the party at the entrance of the white, stone castle itself. A winding avenue of pines led rather suddenly out to an approach, that, to Pepita's enchanted gaze, seemed to belong to a fairy tale. On each side of the deeply-arched gateway rose round towers with narrow windows cut into the thick walls at intervals, like so many very wide-awake eyes watching whoever should come. Stretching away from the towers the castle heaved its mighty bulk of masonry in a succession of turrets, battlements and more towers, solid yet fascinatingly beautiful.

The huge iron-studded doors were flung wide, and, framed in the archway, with a picturesque retinue of servants about him, stood a white-clad figure, at sight of whom Mrs. Malcolm gave a glad cry and positively

precipitated herself from the car as it drew up. A moment more and she was in her father's arms, and her fellow travellers looking on with pleased eyes at a reconciliation so evidently complete.

But, with true Spanish courtesy, the don's attention was turned almost immediately upon the strangers.

"We will converse in English, my daughter, in honour of our guests," he interrupted her, as she started a rapid flow in their own language.

For an instant she, as well as the other arrivals, stared in astonishment at the tall, handsome old Spaniard, then, with a gay laugh, she slipped an arm through one of his.

"Father," she cried, as she drew him forward for introductions, "how splendid! And how like you to be equal to every occasion! When I went away you knew scarcely any English, but now . . .! This is going to make everything more delightful, because, as yet, Auntie, Pepita and Ella know very little Spanish."

Don Felipe gave the elder of his guests a satisfied look out of his great dark eyes before he bowed low over her hand.

"Welcome to d'Alvarez, Lady Denning," he said. "I am fortunate indeed that my study through the years made lonely by my own stubborn pride should have been so rewarded."

Then, after a warm greeting to his son-in-law and Ella, he turned swiftly, as though only courtesy to the adults had kept him from her for so long, to his granddaughter.

"The little Pepita! My beautiful child!" he said softly, a quiver of emotion stirring his proud features. Then, as he stooped to clasp her, Pepita flung impulsive arms about her grandfather's neck.

Entry into the castle was in the nature of a triumphal procession. If the three who were entire strangers to it had expected to find anything primitive they were agreeably enlightened. Although the whole atmosphere of the place was mediæval, wealth had long ago dismissed primitiveness. In the great flagged courtyard, about which the castle was built, fountains played coolly, with musical tinkle and splash, into clear pools that reflected the deep blue of the sky; acacia trees threw graceful shadows, and flowering, exotic shrubs proclaimed their southern setting. Through double-horseshoe arches, cunningly carved, the guests were ushered into a great, lofty hall, to pass across its black and white tiled floor into the drawing-room, a vast apartment that was a wonder room, with deep window recesses through which could be caught glimpses of the smiling valley far, far below.

Some days afterwards, a letter that conveyed a pretty good idea of Pepita's impressions left the castle on its way to England, and was later sent on by its

delighted recipient to Guinevere, who, in turn, posted it for Kathleen's perusal.

I'm enclosing a dose of Pepper. I know you and Kath will enjoy it, Jill's covering letter had said; and although the dose consisted of many pages of the most appalling scrawl of which Pepita was capable, it was clamourously received by the readers.

Dear Jillums (Pepita wrote), *fancy my having to start writing a letter on the day after arrival here! But if I don't do it my thoughts and pen will run away with me later, and I shall be absolutely chaotic. Besides, all the others are having a siesta, and* I *couldn't siesta for nuts. But I shall spread the letter over several days to save stamps, so there! Skinflint, did I hear you say? Very well, no 'present for a good girl' for* you *when I return from Spain. But, joking aside, as the people say who never do any. My* dear, *I'm being thrilled every minute to the very backbone in this* marvellous *castle on this* marvellous *mountain in the middle of* marvellous *Spain. I can't* begin *to describe the scenery; it's simply too,* too . . . ! *As you know, I never could write poetry, and it would be positively sinful to describe it in prose. I don't know that it isn't just as sinful not to epic the castle and Grandpa, but here goes! I'll start with the castle because I want you to picture Grandpa when I fit him into it. All of it crazes me with excitement, but the drawing-room most of all, I*

think. Panels of tapestry, my child! You never did *! It's priceless in more ways than one. Lots of d'Alvarez history is told on it, and I must say that some of my Spanish ancestors and ancestresses, done in needlework, look like nothing on earth. But, though I'm bound to grin a bit, of course I'm awfully proud of them when I look at the paintings of them—huge pictures that reach nearly from floor to ceiling—which show what they were* really *like.* Such *a handsome lot! I feel a positive little turnip in front of them, although Grandpa is polite enough to say that Mummy and I are descendants they ought to be proud of. Of course, all their gorgeous clothes add to the general effect, but it isn't a case of 'fine feathers making fine birds'. Those bygone d'Alvarez Dons and their wives would look handsome even in rags.*

And talking of rags reminds me. I'm to be let loose in a roomful of my grandmother's glad-rags, as soon as Juanita, Mummy's old nurse, has had time to pick out a few special ones which are to be put away among the heirlooms. The rest are to be MINE *for amateur theatricals and the like! ! !*

(*Second day's siesta, of which I'm not having any.*)

To go on with the drawing-room. From the middle of the ceiling hangs a tremendous crystal chandelier that looks like a palace in the air all on its own, and when it is lit, as it is at night now that the castle is sort of en fête *in our honour, it shines like a thousand rainbows. Then*

there's a perfectly huge carpet of azure and gold; the curtains are of goldy brocade, and all the upholstering is a mixture of the same colours, with crimson included. Everything seems to match the rich colouring in the paintings. It's a heavenly room, Jill. I could sit in it for hours and not be bored.

The dining-room fascinates me nearly as much. More pictures, and Mummy and I are as like a Pepita d'Alvarez of 1570, *who hangs there, as peas in a pod. So, although I don't show among the Malcolms, I do among the d'Alvarez, and so long as it's one or t'other, I don't mind a scrap. I hate sitting on the dining-room chairs. Not because they're hard—though they are, being of ebony, with* no *cushions or padded seats!—but each back is inlaid with an ivory grandee, so* very *grand, too, that it seems awful cheek to lean against the poor dear, apart from the bad manners of turning one's back on him. I expect I shall return to Redlands looking as stiff as a ramrod through sitting bolt upright so much, and all the girls will talk about my wicked pride. I must depend upon you to explain how I couldn't—no I couldn't—loll on a Spanish grandee.*

The place is a maze of corridors, winding stairs, nooks and alcoves—ideal for games of hide-and-seek; and, from the tales Grandpa tells me of it, plenty of them have been played in the past, though not *for fun, let me tell you. No joke, eh, dodging somebody who's thirsting for your good red blood—or should it be blue? Personally, I've never seen any but red as yet!*

Arches and pillars seem everywhere, all of mosaics, that glitter and twinkle like dewdrops do in the sun.

This third day, at the usual snooze-time, finds me in my bedroom. Not the one Grandpa had planned for me; that *was an absolute barn for size—I should have felt lost in it. Grandpa meant well, the dear, but it simply paralysed me to think of sleeping in its great four-poster bed, and the tapestry round the walls would have given me nightmare. So I said I'd set my heart on sleeping in a tower-room, and chose one myself. If I wake up at night I wish I hadn't done—it's so frightfully creepsome half-way up in the tower, and I fancy stealthy footsteps will come shuffling up the winding stairs. Once I nearly yelled 'Help! Murder!' but managed to get the better of the fright I was merely giving myself. I'm glad I did. I don't believe Grandpa would ever forgive funk, or, at any rate, the showing of it, in a d'Alvarez.*

Perhaps it's time I told you a bit about him. Well, picture a very tall, rather thin, man with black hair and a moustache just as jetty, but not a bit like the little smudges you see on Englishmen. It's a long, fierce, pointed affair, that seems to twitch sometimes like a cat's whiskers do when it's angry or excited. His eyes (Grandpa's, I mean, of course, not the cat's) are black too, and if I hadn't become fond of him already, I think they would squiggle my spine, they're so proud and piercing. I mean, I wouldn't like eyes like that after me here, in the kind of hide-and-seek games that ended

up in cold steel. Ugh! He's awf'lly fascinating, though, with a skin that would make a ripping sun-tan advertisement, and send green with envy the people who nearly skin themselves to get brown on holidays. And his haughty, dignified ways are only just the don blood fizzling up; he's a dear, really; all the servants and the village people think heaps of him, although he does *like to get his own way about everything. I love to see he and Daddy hobnobbing—they're such contrasts; probably that's why they get on so well together.*

Grandpa owns that he always liked Daddy; it was just d'Alvarez pride that objected to one of the family marrying a nobody, as he thought then, of course. And, talking of pride, one of the first things we all had to do on the very first day here was to chase off to the priest who married Mummy and Daddy and have everything put right about the name. Now Grandpa is quite content. Juanita says she thinks if he had held out much longer it would have killed him; pride was eating his heart out, as she puts it. She says the difference in him since he got Mummy's message to say that we were going to him is like a miracle. She is sure that happiness will restore him to perfect health. He's quite the most elegant man I've ever seen—except for his dandified ancestors in their silks and satins; he always wears spotless white linen or tussore suits, and looks splendid in them, being so dark and olive-skinned. I admire him tremendously, and as he seems frightfully keen on me—I suppose because I'm so like Mummy—all's well

between the houses of d'Alvarez and Malcolm. He has taken a great fancy to Gran. They yarn together by the hour, thanks to his English.

Gran, Ella and I were devastated before we arrived to think what idiots we should look ringing the changes on the half-dozen or so Spanish sentences we'd learned from Mummy and Daddy on the way, and filling in the rest by signs. Imagine our relief when Grandpa suggested grandly, immediately we met, that English should be spoken in our honour, speaking it himself quite capitally, though with the most fascinating accent and little mistakes. Juanita says she's sure the study of it has kept him from going melancholy. He made her study it with him, and by all accounts led her a pretty fine life of it; she found it fearfully hard, poor thing, but swotted away at it to please him, because she felt certain of what was in the back of his mind, although he dared her ever to mention Mummy's name after he turned her out, and never did himself till the day he wrote the letter, and then nothing could be done quickly enough for him. Howsomdever, all's well that ends well. Which was what I decided after a happening last evening that gave me a pit-patty heart for a while. But of that anon, which means, in this case, Spanish snooze-time to-morrow afternoon.

Fourth day.

Let's burble of brigands, thought of which miscreants was responsible for my fright of the other eve. Of

course, there are *brigands—Spain wouldn't be Spain without 'em. But I, dear innocent, wasn't even dreaming of brigandses when I slipped away into the pine woods hereabouts all by my lonesome to get some of the gorgeous forest flowers to press for Miss Drew; you* know *what a craze she has for new specimens. Well, I'd strayed and strayed, picking and picking, when I suddenly heard shouts and thuddings and jinglings, and down upon me bore a couple of the most villainous-looking rascals, riding mules. 'Brigands!' says I to meself, and prepared to be d'Alvarez in pluck. They pulled up and gabbled at me, but, of course, I couldn't make out a word, so I simply smiled, shook my head, and waved my flowers, and was marching on with dignity when one of the men snatched me up in front of him, and away we went like the wind.*

Captured by brigands! Held to ransom! I could see the headlines in the papers and imagine all the folks in the castle tearing their hair, and I wondered how much Grandpa, Daddy and Gran would be able to rake up between them to get me back. But just as my thoughts were becoming jumbled to a jelly by the galloping, up to the castle we dashed from a direction I didn't know, and next minute we were in the courtyard amongst everybody, with me on my tootsies again and my brigands bowing and smiling to me as though they had done me the biggest service ever. Perhaps they had, for Grandpa said:

"Two of my foresters, Pepita, my dear. There is a

forest fire a mile or so back; on their way to get the villagers to help cut a clearing to stop it they were horrified to find you right in its track. They apologize for the rough ride, but could not make you understand, so had to take swift measures."

You can guess I jolly well shook hands with my two brigands after that *bit of interpreting!*

Fifth day.

I've been turned loose in the room that holds my Grandmother's things, so can't stay to write much more at present. You'll be glad to know, though, that rumpusses between the d'Alvarez tribes for possession of Mummy will not *take place. It was all settled at a pow-wow last night, and what do you think? Grandpa wants to return with us to Denning and stay for an English Christmas, after which Gran and Ella are coming back to have the holiday of their lives, wintering here with him. Then Grandpa is going to buy a big yacht, which will be always busy keeping up a constant* entente *between d'Alvarez and Denning. So you can bet your boots that* you *will see our castle in Spain some day.*

Next week I shall have a chance to squander some of my hundred pounds. We're going to Madrid, Barcelona and other places, so . . .

To be continued in our next,

By your pal Pep.

CHAPTER X

PILGRIMAGE AND PLEASURES

It was Pepita's first Sunday in the home of her Spanish forebears, and as though some of the aloof quiet of their mountain fastness had descended upon her, her usually lively chatter was stilled; her glowing dark eyes held a dreamy softness as she threaded the flagged paths of the beautiful old courtyard, with an arm flung round her mother's supple figure. Now and again, with attention attracted by the unusual silence, Mrs. Malcolm turned an inquiring gaze upon her daughter, but those flashing scrutinies telling her that the girl was deep in thought about something which she would reveal only as the mood took her, she attempted neither questions nor disturbing remarks.

She was rewarded presently by a confidence. "Mummy," Pepita broke out, after a while, her voice on a soft, slightly hesitant note, "I want to go on a pilgrimage."

Mrs. Malcolm's silky black eyebrows went up in surprise. "Well—but, darling, you *are* going on one—we all are this week, as you know."

Pepita shook her head. "Ah, but that will hardly

be a pilgrimage, Mummy dear. Touring towns and cities will be just pleasuring—seeing everything that's gay. I do so want to go on another kind of journey first, only I'm afraid of upsetting Daddy by mentioning it."

Was understanding dawning on Mrs. Malcolm's face? Pepita thought so, as the two pairs of dusky orbs met in a long, searching look; and after the pause came a low-voiced, half-startled query that verified Pepita in her supposition.

"A pilgrimage?" her mother murmured. "A pilgrimage, Pepita? Surely you do not mean that you want to—to——" She broke off, but her expression was eloquent of that which she was leaving unsaid.

The girl's arm tightened about her. "Yes," came her half-whispered confirmation. "You know what I mean, Mummy. I can see that you do. I want to travel the road—all the way—right from France—the road that brought Daddy to you. It was all so—so—*wonderful*, the way things happened, so it would be a beautiful pilgrimage. I'd love to make it, and I expect Gran and Ella would too. It's only —Daddy! Do you think he'd mind? Would *you* mind?"

"You dear, funny child!" But there was no hint of scoffing in Mrs. Malcolm's tone; it was inexpressibly gentle, tender; and the shaky little laugh in it

brought a lump into Pepita's throat. "Of course *I* shouldn't mind—and I feel sure Daddy wouldn't with such a reason prompting. It's not like mere curiosity —not just a desire for thrills. The thought is a sweet one, dear, in anyone so young as you are."

"Then—then"—Pepita's voice was eagerly enticing—"you'll put it to Daddy, won't you? Find out what he thinks? *You'll* know *how* to do it, so as not to—jar on him."

"Yes—yes!" Mrs. Malcolm began in agreement; then her smooth brow puckered as a problem suddenly presented itself. "Only—the difficulty is, Pepita love, that he won't remember the route; you see, he was ill when he travelled it—ill in mind as well as in body——"

Pepita interrupted. "Oh, but, Mummy, you were asking Grandpa only yesterday about the people who brought Daddy from France. He said they were still living on the outskirts of the village; and you talked of going to see them. Couldn't one of them——"

"Old Isabella's son! Of course!" Mrs. Malcolm's interruption was as swift as her daughter's. "My dear! I had forgotten for the moment. Of course, Manoel can take you; he will probably be only too glad to earn and to visit his birthplace too. His mother will be too aged for the journey now, I fear, although I quite expect she will want to go too, when she hears. How interested the family would be to

see Daddy again! To have cared for a poor sick stranger and have brought him to safety as they did was an act of positive heroism in those terrible times of ruin and desperate flight. Yes, you shall have your pilgrimage, darling, if it can possibly be arranged. It is well that you should see what those peasant folk dared for a foreigner in the midst of their own trouble. They are very poor, and I want to do something for them. Grandpa has said that he will help in any scheme for their benefit. We will go and find them to-morrow."

Looking into the thoughtful face beside her, Pepita felt love for her beautiful Spanish mother surging anew in her heart, and wondered afresh at the haughty spirit that had for so long fostered anger and bitterness against such a sweet-natured being.

"Oh, thank you, Mummy dear!" she cried fervently, adding inquiringly: "You don't think there would be any risk . . . to Daddy? I'd rather give up the idea for the present than worry him with thoughts of the past."

Mrs. Malcolm pondered. Then: "I don't think it would do that now," she decided at length. "My opinion is that he will choose to be a pilgrim too, with us. But I'll broach the subject very carefully, dear. I shall know at once if it distresses him. If it does not, I will talk to Grandpa after; he will arrange all frontier affairs for us. They will take a

little time, but"—she smiled into the girl's animated face—"we people of Spain are not impetuous as to time. You will have to learn patience here, Pepita. Spaniards are never in a hurry."

Pepita's mischievous laugh rang out. "The ones in the castle will be by the time *I've* finished gingering them up," was her saucy retort. "You ought to see me bustling Juanita. It's no good, Mummy. I'm only *half* Spanish, remember, so you'll never find me doing in Spain what Spain does. *I* shall wake everybody up."

It certainly seemed as if her supreme self-assurance was justified, at any rate as regards the castle itself. Its too slumbrous ways went down before Pepita's darting footsteps, lively tongue and pealing laughter like corn before the sickle. True, she left it its time-honoured siesta, telling her grandfather, with impish smile, that otherwise she could see him and all his people falling asleep for twenty years, like Rip Van Winkle; but, in reality, the period of absolute quiet that descended daily upon the mountain stronghold had taken a tremendous grip upon her fancifulness. She loved to prowl noiselessly about the seemingly deserted place, lingering to gaze upon its wonders and beauties wherever, and as long as, she willed, her brain weaving stories of old-time splendours, deeds of valour and, sometimes—terrors—dreaming, dreaming. . . .

But that particular dreaming went by the board during the days that followed. The cool of the next morning saw her setting off with her parents on the long, sloping forest walk that was to take them to the humble abode of the old woman whom the war had driven home with her children, after the death of her French farmer husband had destroyed what little security she had felt in a country where war was raging.

The question in Pepita's eyes as they had met her mother's that morning had been soon answered. Mrs. Malcolm's quick little nod and bright smile had told their own tale of assurance without her low-toned, "I was right, dear. The pilgrimage appeals to Daddy too. We will find old Isabella and ask if her son can act as guide."

So, eager to travel, as she was to show, one of the favourite walks of her girlhood, her husband and daughter set off, one on either side of her, down the dim, pine-scented, wooded slopes.

The dwelling they reached at length was built of mountain boulders and pine logs, but the roughness of its construction seemed only to enhance its look of strength and durability. On a great wide shelf on the mountain-side it stood, its back wall the mountain itself, a group of massive pines growing above, spreading gaunt arms over it as if in benediction, season after season of dropping pine needles

making a soft, scented carpet in front that deadened the visitors' footsteps. For all that, a voice halted them before they reached the doorway, sounding gruff and distrustful.

But as the three stood still in the sunlight, just out of range of the shadowing pines, a cracked old voice from within the abode shrilled out: "Donna Teresa!" and a change came over the face of the black-browed man who had strode out to meet the intruders. Bewilderment, amaze, recognition—Pepita watched one expression give place to another as he gazed from her mother to her father; then his grim lips parted, to show his perfect teeth in a brilliant smile of welcome. After that, the girl could only stand gaping and listening, when, a shuffling, wrinkled old woman having come hastening outside, a perfect fusillade of rapid Spanish began between four pleasurably excited people.

Her father turned laughingly to her at last. "Sorry you're out of this, Pep, old girl——" he began.

"Oh, but I'm not entirely," she returned gaily, made happy by the happiness so evident in the others. "I can't make head or tail of what you're all saying, of course—it's all too much of a gabble for my poor little beginnings in Spanish. But your faces tell me *lots*."

He beamed understandingly upon her. "My good Samaritans seem as glad to see me as I am to see

"'Selfish!' she echoed. 'Stuff and nonsense, Grandpa!'"

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them," he said. "Manoel says I am a miracle of change while yet the same man. That is how he puts it, and *you* will know well enough what he means."

Pepita's lustrous curls danced to her emphatic nod, and her glance flashed warmly between the peasant mother and son as she impulsively held out a hand to each. Evidently gratified by her friendly action and gracious air, they smiled and gestured and chattered, till her look of comical bewilderment brought her parents to the rescue as interpreters.

Presently, noticing the girl's curious gaze straying towards the mountain hut, the old woman shrugged her shoulders as she uttered a few words and waved a deprecating hand towards it.

"Isabella says, Pepita, that it will honour her if you will look round her poor abode, if you wish," Mrs. Malcolm explained. "Go if you would like to, dear, while Daddy and I discuss the pilgrimage with them."

And only too glad of the chance of gratifying curiosity while she awaited the result of the parley, Pepita slipped away to the fascinating job of exploring.

The deep window spaces, that were mere holes left by cunning arrangement of the boulders, let more light into the three rock-floored rooms than she had thought possible from an outside survey. It showed her a poverty that appalled her, a tidiness that surprised her, nevertheless, and a carefully-tended

shrine in a corner. It seemed to her girlish fancy that she had happed upon it by no blind chance, that it set a seal of approval, perhaps of blessing, upon her pilgrimage. Unusually deep, for her, went her thoughts at sight of it. Her father had spoken one day of the many wayside shrines he had seen in France. Now she could picture what she soon hoped to see, and in a sudden flood came a true realization of the miraculous guiding of her father's life. She understood that her mother's desire to lighten the lot of his saviours was in the nature of a thank-offering, and Pepita resolved then and there that a portion of her own precious little store of money should be set aside to buy something for their comfort or pleasure.

She mooted the idea on the homeward climb, and was rewarded by the understanding in her parents' smiles.

"A mule would be within your means, I think, Pep," her father said. "We had a job to get out of Isabella and her son what they would most like done for them. They are simple folk who love their mountain home and wish to be left to its peace and solitude in the ordinary way, but, even so, there are comforts to be had that would increase their enjoyment of it, and your Mother, Grandpa and I intend to see that they get them in future."

Pepita nodded satisfaction. "And the mule, Daddy?" she reminded him eagerly.

"Oh yes! Manoel would like one to carry his mother down the mountain roads and along the valley sometimes to see her daughter and grandchildren. It is a five-mile trek—too far for her to walk now, but Manoel could take her often on muleback. The walk is nothing to him. So there is a joy that you can put within their reach, Pep."

She was jubilant. "Glory! How jolly, Daddy!" she cried. "But where does one buy a mule, and how can one tell if he's well-behaved and all that? Supposing I gave them a biter or a kicker! It would be awful."

Mr. Malcolm chuckled. "I never knew a mule that wasn't a biter *and* a kicker, and I had dealings with plenty of them in France," he said, "so we'd better leave the purchase to Manoel, who understands the animals and their little ways."

Pepita sighed mischievous relief. "A sort of 'Upon his own head be the consequences'. Good! And now, dears," her tone dropped to gentleness as she interrogated both, "what about the pilgimage? Will he go as guide?"

But at the mention of the journey upon which Pepita's heart was set, John Malcolm's gaze went reminiscently off into space, his air became preoccupied, and it was left to his wife to answer. She gave Pepita a soft little smile. "They both want to go," she said. "Isabella won't hear of anything

different—insists that she will prove a better guide than Manoel—women are more observant than men, she says. The way will have changed somewhat during all these years. She thinks she will remember it better than her son will."

"She's probably right." John Malcolm had come out of his brown study sufficiently to be aware of his wife's remarks. "There was so much at stake for her on that fugitive journey—the safety and feeding of her family and a sick stranger ; and she was coming home. Home, after many years ! You and I, Teresa, know the significance of that. Every scene would be graven on her mind for ever ; every foot of the way would be precious."

Every foot of the way was precious to Pepita too, although no longed-for homecoming was the finis of that never-to-be-forgotten journey through Spain into France. For those changes which Time had wrought on the route had little power to distract Isabella's memory. Tucked away inside the big car, even her sense of novelty in riding in one for the first time, and her delight in its comfort, were not allowed to interfere with her keen attention ; and the only regret of Pepita, Lady Denning and Ella, was their inability to follow for themselves the rapid outpourings of her graphic descriptions. But if her recollections lost something by translation, her vivid gesticulation, flashing black eyes and the expressions

that chased each other across her face as she talked, were a revelation in themselves, and even the listeners, to whom her native tongue was as yet unintelligible, were able to picture that long-ago journey of fear, despair, hope and fulfilment, that had been taken from war and desolation to peace and restfulness, in an old farm wagon.

The pilgrims stopped for meals and their nightly rest at farmhouses, and it was in an orchard of one of these that Pepita pencilled another screed to England, this time to her Redlands' antagonist.

Dear Rival (Guinevere read a couple of days later), *I'm doing a thing that I shall remember all my life, and I'm telling you about it so that you will know that however much we two squabble in the future I couldn't possibly stop feeling grateful and friendly towards you. Because, you see, Vere, I shouldn't be doing what I am if you hadn't done what you did. It sounds like a riddle, but* you *will know it isn't one.* You'll *understand. Vere, I'm being a pilgrim. That I'm being one in a rippingly comfy car and without doing a spot of walking except to stretch my legs and bolt into delightful farm-houses for delicious tuck-ins, doesn't make me any less a pilgrim than the ones who used to do bare-footed hobbles for umpteen miles ; even a pilgrim must be up-to-date. And at the moment I'm pilgriming with Daddy, Mummy, Gran, Ella and two others in France, close to*

a long white road running through a place that I don't even know the name of. All that matters is that the long white road is one along which Daddy travelled to Spain after he was knocked out in the war years ago—you remember the story he told us on the lawn at Redlands two days after I flew away from it? Daddy can't recognize the road, of course, because he was too ill to know anything about it when he was taken along it then, so this is just as wonderful and as stirring a pilgrimage to him as to the rest of us. He says that all the road meant to him then was a grinding of wheels and a series of jolts that seemed to be going on forever and ever. It was a marvel that he lived through such a journey.

The old Spanish woman who looked after him is with us—she and her son are the two others I spoke of just now; they're being our guides—and the things they can tell! I look and look at the places they point out which were deserted and desolate and think it must all seem like a bad dream to them now. But it was only too *real at the time. No hospitably open doors then, Isabella says. Wherever one* did *hang open there was no sign of life—the people of the house had fled. Food was her biggest problem. The stuff they ate! Ugh! I get the creeps when I think about the frog stews et cetera. Isabella seems to have made soup for Daddy out of goodness knows what. Anyhow, it kept him alive—that and her herb tea! She knows heaps about herbs, and Daddy thinks there's no doubt*

she cured his fever with them. And there was poor, dear old Gran, who could have paid for every comfort for him, fretting her heart out in England because he had been reported killed. You see, his identity-disc and bits of his clothes were found, and as he never *was, it was naturally decided that he had simply been blown to bits with most of his men. And all the time every jolt and grind of the wheels of an old farm cart was taking him nearer to Mummy—and Gran, though the sixteen years to Gran was a* very *long road, wasn't it? And if it hadn't been for your curiosity fence heading him off it, he might have gone on and on along it without ever finding her, and I might never have known my own father and mother.*

So, Vere, out here near the long white road, each side of which the country is so smiling and pretty now, I want to ask you not to be unhappy any more about what was behind *your curiosity fence. Kath told me the other day that you had been broody at times over having driven me into running away; that you'd said, supposing the 'plane had crashed and I'd been killed or anything else awful had happened. Well, nothing awful did happen—only wonderful things, and what you did was meant to be, so look at it that way and don't brood any more. There! now that I've preached my little sermon, don't expect anything serious from me ever again! I'm not capable of two such bursts in one lifetime. It will be like my pilgrimage—a one and only; perhaps that is why I am clutching at every minute of the*

pilgrimage, as I shall never need to clutch at the gaiety that, soon after this reaches you, I shall be head over heels in.

Felicitations and farewell from,
Ever your persecutor,
Pepper.

A few days later, with the pilgrimage over, the mule bought, and two humble folk made happy with creature comforts they had never before known, Pepita stood with an open letter in her hand, at the narrow window of her tower-room in the castle, looking down towards the valley she was to traverse next day on pleasuring bent. Thoughtfully, after a while, her shining eyes came back from alluring distance to the letter, and a little pleased smile curled the corners of her mouth as she read again.

Dear Greek,

It was fine of you to write to me as you did about the pilgrimage. Somehow your telling of it has seemed to iron out some creases that were still ruckling my conscience, even though I had tried to smooth them out by making a clean breast of everything at home. I have felt such a positive pig, *even though things did turn out so marvellously happily for you. And my people didn't help me to feel less of one, I can tell you. They were so horrified at what I had done that I had a job to*

get them even to listen to, much less believe in, the happy ending. I was told that I had disgraced the name of Castleton by such conduct, so you can guess I felt a worm as well as a pig. But whatever other impressions in the menagerie line I might have sampled have been prevented by your letter, which has acted like oil on a stormy sea. You don't mind *that I showed it to Mummy and Daddy, do you? Nobody else will see it, of course. But it has made all the difference. They feel now that all is well, and they want to know you. So, Greek, if you don't give me your solemn promise to spend part of the Christmas hols at Castleton, mark my words, there'll be another big tug-of-war directly we meet next! You can bring Jill to act as a buffer between us if you like, but come you must, or I shall never believe you have forgiven*

Your persecuted Peacock.

Carefully Pepita tore the letter into undecipherable fragments. No one but herself should read that outpouring of a humbled pride.

"A pig, a worm and a peacock!" she mused whimsically. "Poor old Vere! But she's earned a better title than that now. She's a sport, after all!"

And because Pepita was such a sport herself, the ability at last to bestow a like title on the girl she had hitherto despised as being the very opposite to school standards of sportiness, filled her cup of happiness to the brim.

That the pilgrimage had delayed the departure for pleasuring irked her not at all. During the two or three days required to rest the elder pilgrims ere the new start was made under the escort of Don Felipe himself, Pepita found plenty with which to busy herself, one interesting job being the developing of the many snapshots which she had taken on the pilgrimage.

"Can I have the key of the dungeon, Grandpa?" she astounded that dignified gentleman by asking on the day after the arrival back at the castle.

He stroked his long moustachios, and his piercing black eyes, now so often betraying inward laughter, twinkled at his vivacious granddaughter.

"May I inquire for what reason?" he countered amusedly. "Is it that you desire to do penance? A penance for dragging those long-suffering ones on so tiring a pilgrimage?"

Her roguish pinch at one of his ears showed how complete was the understanding and friendship between them.

"Lazy! *You* are the one who should do penance for *shirking* it," was her laughing retort.

But the amusement died out of his face all at once. His proud gaze was fixed upon her with a pained expression.

"You think that I shirked, little one? You think that I was lazy?" The words were as much statement as query, but Pepita was quick to shake her head.

"Of course not, Grandpa. I was only ragging. Aren't I always ragging?"

If he understood the school slang, he was not pacified by it.

"Ah, but you were right in part, Pepita," he murmured regretfully. "I *did* shirk the pilgrimage. True, there was little room in the car for another pilgrim, and I made that my excuse, but in reality I shrank from dwelling on the sad past. Sixteen years of unhappiness have made me—selfish. I want only to hug my present joy."

For a moment Pepita stared, wide-eyed, concerned at the confession that her careless remark had provoked. Then, with soft hands upon his shoulders, she shook him gently.

"Selfish!" she echoed. "Stuff and nonsense, Grandpa! There's no selfishness in wanting to be happy. Why *shouldn't* you be?"

From his chair he looked up into her piquant face.

"Have I a right to be, Pepita, after my hard-heartedness to my only child?" was the wistful question he put to her.

She replied to it with an impetuous one of her own, childishly uttered, yet with a woman's wisdom underlying it.

"Grandpa, when *I've* been naughty, haven't I a right to be happy again when I've shown that I'm sorry?"

His arm went round her at that, and, drawing the bright face to his level, he kissed it.

"I am answered, little one," he said, and, releasing her, he rose with the relieved, upright bearing of one who has thrown off a burden. "And now"—his face held a radiance she had never seen on it before —"what of the dungeon?"

She dug a proprietory arm through one of his.

"It'll make such a ripping dark-room for photography," she said placidly. "So come along, Grandpa dear, and help me develop my 'snaps'. I've crowds to do."

And the sounds of merry discussion and outbursts of laughter that presently emerged from a dim depth below the castle, meagrely lit by a tiny grating and a red photographic lamp, must surely have laid any ghosts of long-dead languishers.

With the easing by his granddaughter of the load of self reproach, Don Felipe seemed to positively take on a new lease of life. Buoyancy was in the gait that had for long lacked any lightness, only an easy Spanish grace having prevented it from falling into a weary slouch. His slow Southern ways seemed to brisk up under the urge of his great happiness; it was as if the joy within him effervesced and kept him in a perpetual state of animation.

Certainly Pepita found him a cavalier after her own heart on that glorious tour of Spain. Tirelessly

he fished with adroit questioning to find out what she knew of the country and its history. In a way that commanded her breathless attention, he expanded what knowledge she had, often coaxing the rest of the party miles from the planned route on purpose to show her a building of rare historical worth, a religious procession, a carnival—anything that he judged would interest her or amuse her. Not that the rest needed much coaxing, the one concerted and laughing protest being that Pepita's head would be several sizes larger before the tour was over. But, as a matter of fact, the bond between the Don and his youngest relative was a lovely thing to witness, and even the strictest disciplinarian, who might have deplored his devotion to her slightest whim, would have been disarmed by the girl's spontaneous affection for him. She gave unmistakable evidence of it by her endeavours to please him, her perseverance in learning his language amazing Lady Denning and Ella, who were so well aware of her leisure-loving disposition.

But the impulsive generosity that was so characteristic of Pepita would not allow her to accept all and give nothing in return. Laden with her grandfather's gifts wherever she went, she was always casting about in her mind for tactful methods of showing her appreciation, and it spoke volumes for her cleverness that she found ways and means of doing so without rousing the queer pride in him that chilled anything

in the way of profuse thanks for benefits he chose to confer.

As they strolled together one evening in the grounds of one of the many hotels visited on the tour, the pair were food for conversation to Lady Denning and Mrs. Malcolm, who, from their lounge-chairs on the patio, watched Pepita's dancing steps beside her grandfather.

"How different it would have been, Auntie," Mrs. Malcolm mused in her soft contralto voice, "if reconciliation had found John and me without a Pepita. The gap of years between could never have been bridged so completely without that child. I have never known my father so captivated; she is the light of his eyes. But she seems to carry sunshine wherever she goes."

Lady Denning glanced aside admiringly at the beautiful woman upon whom she had already bestowed deep affection.

"The sunshine of your Sunny Spain, Teresa," she said, smiling.

Mrs. Malcolm's answering smile implied acknowledgment of the tribute to her native land. "Though we have our storms too," she said.

Lady Denning nodded, understanding full well that the younger woman referred to the passionate Spanish temper. "I know," she said, still smiling. "I *ought* to know, having brought up Pepita. But—the sunshine predominates, and—well, *you are* captivating yourself, my dear, so I no longer wonder at Pepita."

Dimples that matched her daughter's showed in Mrs. Malcolm's cheeks at the compliment, the very bluntness of which testified to its sincerity.

"But—*I* never cast the spell on my father that Pepita has done," she averred lightly. "He was a devoted father until—the break—yet, I was never able to turn his will to mine as she turns it to hers."

Lady Denning looked thoughtful. "She has caught him at the rebound, as one might say. Possibly he did not realize until you had left him quite how priceless a possession you were. He lost some golden years, Teresa; and although *they* are gone beyond recall, he sees a chance of future ones in the love of the child who is your living image. He is ready to barter his all for that prospect. Besides, age softens, my dear. *I* know that."

"Age?" Mrs. Malcolm threw a startled glance after the dignified figure still in view with its sprightly consort. "It is difficult for me to think of Daddy as getting old."

Lady Denning nodded. "Your father showed his age when we came, but Pepita has rejuvenated him as she rejuvenated Ella and me. Teresa, my dear, we're a happy little party!"

Mrs. Malcolm was beaming again. "A happy little party! Ah, yes!" she cried, and welcomed with smiling gaze the white-haired, blue-eyed man who sauntered up at that moment to take a seat between them.

CHAPTER XI

REVELS AT DENNING

JILL, arriving at Denning Abbey about the middle of September to spend the last week of the holidays with Pepita, immediately felt herself in an atmosphere of complete happiness such as she doubted its old walls had ever known before. Sea and mountain air, following upon the joys of reunion, had given the travellers a look of vigour and general contentment with life that struck Jill with fresh pleasure every time she looked at them.

"You all ought to be on a poster with 'Go to Spain for your holidays', printed on it," she laughingly told Pepita, when that damsel's room had been resorted to for a 'good old burble'.

The shining lights in Pepita's eyes were good to see.

"We've had a gorgeous time," she said, "and I believe Grandpa is going to enjoy England as much as we enjoyed Spain. He's interested in everything, and so toppingly well now that Mummy and Daddy will be able to take him about lots. You'd think there would be nothing new under the sun to such a tremendously rich man as he is, but he has been

hardly anywhere. He loves his mountain home—and you won't wonder when you've seen it—but he has mewed himself up in it more than was good for him, *we* think. However, *that* isn't likely to happen any more. I can see him taking us in relays on world tours when he gets his yacht. What do you think of him?"

"Oh, he's wonderful!" Jill's tone was as forceful as were her words. "His grave sort of way scared me at first, but once I'd seen his smile I found myself watching for the next. It fascinates me; it's so positively dazzling."

Pepita nodded understandingly. "*I* know; that's how it strikes me too. It's just as if he had been used to unhappiness for so long that he'd almost forgotten how to smile, and then he suddenly realizes the jolly thing that has happened to him, and it flashes out. And it seems, too, as though he can't do enough for Mummy and Daddy to make up for the awful time they've been through, poor dears. He has settled lots of money on them, and nothing would satisfy him but that Daddy should go to a famous specialist when we got to London to make quite sure that there was nothing likely to cause any more memory lapses or nerve trouble."

"But surely there isn't," murmured Jill. "Mr. Malcolm looks the picture of health now."

"He is, too," was Pepita's satisfied assurance.

"Grandpa's only worry was in case a piece of shell had caused the trouble and might do it again. But the specialist soon settled that. Caused entirely by shock, he said, and no further effects need be feared. So *that* was all right, and we all came along here as cheerful as grigs. Grandpa even said afterwards that perhaps all those years that seem wasted in poor Daddy's life were a blessing in disguise ; if his brain hadn't been kind of stunned for so long by the shock, it might not have borne it at all. Daddy might have been crazed by it. And he had Mummy all the time. She must always have been such a dear; he can't bear her out of his sight for long. But he's all right now—everything's all right, and I'm the happiest girl alive."

"Dear old Pepper ! I'm as glad as glad for *all* of you." Jill gave her chum a squeeze, and for some moments the two stood side by side, the thoughts of each busy on the chapter of Malcolm history that, but for the wonderful shaping of a few lives, might never have been written on Time's pages.

But thoughts of a radiant present, and a future full of fresh excitements, soon set Pepita's tongue wagging again, and in even more lively vein.

Dragging her friend aside from the window, she cried, "I want heaps of help from you. Wait till you see what I've brought home. Come over here !" And across the room she rushed Jill, to fling wide the

door of a huge cupboard about the size of a powder closet, and push her as far inside as its litter of boxes would allow.

Jill screeched amazedly.

"Pep! *Not* all these? *Not* from Spain?"

Pepita dissolved into a laughter inspired as much by Jill's face as by the recollection of the various vicissitudes that had attended the conveyance home of the extensive 'luggage' she had collected during her holiday.

"Ask the family!" she gurgled, continuing more intelligibly as soon as mirth would let her. "You'd have thought I was bringing home explosives or any other contraband stuff by the fuss that was made at one place and another over my presents for the school."

"Presents! School!" Jill could only gasp and gape.

"S-something for everyb-body!" Pepita was nearly at convulsion-point again.

This announcement seemed too much for Jill's equilibrium. She sat down in the doorway gazing with all her eyes at the boxes, as though by such concentration she could vision their contents.

"The school will go dotty, and Venus will have to read the Riot Act," she pronounced. "Pep"—with a great show of being scandalized—"you must have spent *pounds*!"

"Well, what's the good of having a hundred if you

don't spend plenty of 'em?" retorted the spendthrift. "And I couldn't buy presents for myself *all* the time. Besides, when a girl is full of joy, she wants all her friends to have a share in it, and everybody at Redlands is a friend, more or less—even the Vere vendetta having developed into a kind of friendship. So, after buying something for all my ain folk, I just added up the forms, and the mistresses, included the maids, and then collected the right number of gifts that took my fancy in the different places we went to. Now there's the business of choosing which is for whom, and packing and labelling. That's where I want your help, old thing."

Jill groaned in pretended disgust.

"Then bang goes our chance of a caravanning week," she complained.

But Pepita shunted her mercilessly nearer the boxes.

"Nonsense!" she cried briskly. "A hundred and fifty presents or thereabouts won't take *any* time to sort out, and you know you're dying to see them all, you humbug. Let me squeeze in, and we'll start now. Afterwards I'll show you all the things that Grandma used to wear."

"If I haven't died of exhaustion," laughed Jill. But the alacricity with which she pounced on the intriguing boxes threw a pretty safe measure of doubt upon that calamity.

Never had days flown so quickly to Jill as did the

jolly ones of that eagerly anticipated week under the changed conditions at Denning, but with the beginning of term, charged with new excitements, neither she nor Pepita grudged the swift passing of holiday-time. For Don Felipe had mooted a little idea of his own for the beguiling of next half term; to celebrate, he said, this great occasion of his first visit to England and the gift of a charming granddaughter.

Open-handed himself, he had watched with secret pleasure her generous outlay upon gifts for the Redlandsites, and had come to the conclusion that nothing would please her better than festivities in which all her schoolfellows could join.

So, his plan having met with the enthusiastic approval of Lady Denning, he had smilingly broached it to the two girls, whose reception of it had completely satisfied him that he was on the right track.

"But, Grandpa, you must really come to Redlands yourself and tell everybody about it," Pepita had gaily told him. "They would never believe me if I talked about such doings. They'd say Spain had gone to my head and I was romancing."

To which suggestion Don Felipe had benevolently replied:

"I shall be only too pleased, little one, to see the all so kind people among whom you are so happy. You shall take me with you when you depart for school once more."

So that was why the 'once more' day found Redlandsites more agog than usual over the expected appearance of Pepita. Word had gone round that her Spanish grandfather was coming to be introduced to the school, coming, too, by the time-honoured means of train and taxi; so a watch was set at every window that no stage of the approach might be missed by anybody.

It was natural, of course, that excitement should be at its highest pitch in Dormie Six, where the travel experiences of its idol were being eagerly looked for; told in Pepita's inimitable style they would prove the sauce of many a tuck-party and enliven many a bedtime pow-wow.

"I wouldn't travel in a taxi with Pep for a fortune," was a remark that followed one to the effect that her train must be in. "If she gingers up the driver to the extent that she usually does, her grandfather's hair will stand on end."

Perhaps it was as well for the Don's pride in d'Alvarez courage that his broad-brimmed hat entirely covered his ebony locks. Totally unaccustomed to the rapid road locomotion that was his granddaughter's idea of how a taxi should go, he was doing his best to preserve his usual dignified demeanour as he rocked and swayed and bumped beside Mrs. Malcolm, opposite the mischievous-looking pair of schoolgirls who were more often on the floor of the

vehicle than on the precarious perches formed by its small drop-seats.

Not from him, however, did remonstrance come, little though he relished such rollicking transit.

"My dear," protested Mrs. Malcolm, her eyes wide on the grinning Pepita, "I'm sure we're driving to the public danger."

"Couldn't in this old cocoa tin, Mummy dear," giggled the speed-merchant wickedly. "Bound to beat up as much style in it as we can, you know. But it's quite all right—we always arrive safely."

For the confirmation of which careless assurance Don Felipe thanked Heaven under his breath, when he presently alighted beneath a very barrage of school-girl eyes.

Those eyes, ferret-like in keenness, though far more attractive to look at, were letting no detail of the latest arrival escape them, their owners indulging in a buzz of low-toned remarks.

"How *frightfully* distinguished-looking !"

"*Doesn't* he look *romantic* !"

"A positive courtier, isn't he !"

This last as the Don, suddenly aware of the spectators now that he could feel good Mother Earth beneath his feet once more, swept off his wide hat in graceful deference.

"*Look* at all the luggage. Pep *never* brings all that. Surely he isn't expecting to *stay* here ?"

It was Kathleen's loud whisper that focussed the Sixites particular attention on the laden top of the taxi, and as though uncannily aware of it, Pepita's grinning face was uplifted directly to her dormie cronies.

"Presents for good children!" she called up to them with an airy gesture. "So don't stay peering down at us as though we were prize monkeys. Come and meet Grandpa."

Doubtless the Don found facing a hall-full of young ladies, and others not so young, much less of an ordeal than the breaking of speed records, for his smile was of its most dazzling quality when, after he and his daughter had tea'd and chatted with Miss Vene, he took advantage of the latter's gracious permission to expound his little plan.

Into a charmed silence his quaint and highly-fascinating English broke musically.

"The little Pepita, my granddaughter, has acqainted me," he said, "how you are all so kind as to rejoice in the happiness that has come to the houses of Denning and d'Alvarez. Therefore it is my great wish that you should all partake in a carnival and a Spanish ball which Lady Denning will permit that I provide for you—the one on the Abbey grounds, and the other to follow in its dining-hall—on the Friday of your little holiday, the haffterm, I think you call it, next month. The gracious señorita, Miss Vene, has

so kindly agreed that everybody shall reach Denning at eleven o'clock on that day, by the conveyances I shall send, so that the sunshine of the day, of which I trust there will be mooch, may be availed of. When there is the little—the little—ah yes, nip in the air"—here the Don shivered suggestively—"there will be the ball, for which Pepita will provide every señorita with something for the—the—what you call it?—ah, the dress-up. Then at night, when you tire of the dance, there will be the ride back to this charming Redlands, from whence those who desire may depart next morning to their homes for the rest of the haffterm. I mooch hope that every señorita will approve of these little arrangements and honour Lady Denning and me with acceptance for the twenty-eighth of next month."

He had barely finished one courtly bow before a thunder of applause called for others, and as the noise died down he spoke again in a gratified tone, his grave features again lit by his smile.

"It is answered that all accept. Gracias, señoritas. I am mooch honoured, and I shall with pleasure make the orders with your wonderful Lon-don for the preparations. Adios, señoritas."

He left behind him a hubbub that the mistresses were mercifully able to ignore on that occasion by slipping away to the multitudinous duties that always crowd the first day of term; and he left his grand-

daughter to a positive mobbing, for Pepita improved the shining hour by distributing her gifts, cannily aware that something new and pretty to look at and talk about would help many a girl over 'that first day back' feeling.

And the gay prospect for the half-term Friday helped everybody. It was wonderful how the happiness which had come to Pepita seemed to have permeated the whole atmosphere at Redlands ; never had spirits been higher or tempers better. Pepita herself was likened by one of her schoolmates to a perpetual sunbeam, so bright was her face, so sprightly were her movements, so dancing her dark eyes.

Never, too, could the mistresses remember having such an exemplary brood. Marks for both work and conduct looked like beating all previous records, not —be it said to the credit of the girls—because they were actuated by motives of diplomacy ; it had been universally agreed between them that they would thoroughly earn the unusual mid-term treat that Miss Vene's magnanimity was to make possible.

"You know, girls, she might quite reasonably have jibbed over shoving into half term what really amounts to an extra day," one of the prefects had said during a general pow-wow ; "so it's up to us to show her how much we appreciate the ripping way she agreed to everything, by being jolly decent with our work and—all that."

Everybody knew what the 'all that' applied to, so excitement and high spirits were curbed sufficiently to prevent anyone from stepping over the traces of discipline and order. True, tuck-parties occurred with their customary frequency, but with most unusual decorum and avoidance of late hours, and although the practising of dance steps in readiness for the promised ball was the craze of the hour, the practices were conducted in a fashion that aroused no ire in those in authority.

Proof of the triumph of Guinevere's better self was evident to all at this time. If rising colour and straightening lips sometimes betrayed a nature sadly susceptible to Pepita's barbs of wit, Guinevere gave herself time to put a curb on temper before she attempted retaliation, which then, sharp though it might be, at least held no hint of rancour. And although lookers-on at the game of rivalry that would always exist to a certain extent between such a pair watched for signs of jealousy in Guinevere at Pepita's increased popularity, they saw none. Proud Guinevere, finding herself forced to bow to the inevitable, did it with all the grace at her command, which really amounted to a good deal when she chose to give it play.

Unclouded faces, then, both of pupils and mistresses, were the order of the day on an autumnal one as fair and sunny as the heart of any reveller could

wish for, when once again, on pleasuring bent, the bus-loads of Redlandsites set off for Denning Abbey.

No inkling had been given, even to Pepita, of the scale on which preparations were proceeding there, so the finding of Linden *en fête* also, with its inhabitants flocking to the carnival, was as great a surprise to her as to the rest of the school.

"Well," she chuckled, as, during a snatched moment of greeting, she and Lady Denning stood together eyeing the animated scene in the park, "I wonder Grandpa didn't rope in Calchester while he was about it! He seems to have gone into the highways and hedges and bidden folks to the carnival. It's ripping, Gran, isn't it? Lindenites won't forget this little beano in a hurry."

The Abbey's mistress, with the new placidity on her face which had smoothed out all its anxious lines, laid a fond hand on Pepita's shoulder.

"He doesn't mean them to, my love," she said softly. "Because he will never forget how they took a little stranger to their hearts. I think the story I had to tell of their loyalty to you and me all through has touched him more than anything. They were every whit as eager as I was to forget that you did not belong at Denning, as we thought then."

"Dears!" breathed Pepita. "They've all been perfectly sweet to me always."

Lady Denning nodded. "So your Grandpa de-

cided it was only right that he should include them in the rejoicings."

"Of *course*! Topping of him to think of it. And isn't he jolly well enjoying himself among them! Look! I do believe he's going on the switchback; giddy old dear. Come along, Gran. Let's mingle in the jingle."

And in another minute or two the eldest and the youngest of the Abbey's 'ain folk' were in the thick of the fun.

Don Felipe had had some of the most enjoyable days of his life planning the festivities. With all the Southerner's passion for carnival brought out by happiness, he threw himself heart and soul into the preparations. Knowing exactly what he wanted, and having the wherewithal to pay for it, his enthusiasm so inspired the firms he employed that they surpassed themselves in their attendance to his wishes. The lake in the park had been transformed into a miniature Venice with bridges and gondolas. A vast switchback ran its undulating course between mountain scenery so realistically painted that the laughing, squealing travellers could almost imagine themselves scaling hill-tops and delving into gorges. A fine water-chute took screaming passengers down at a rate that made onlookers hold their breath, yet tempted them in their turn to try its rushing swoop.

There was a fortune-teller whose prophecies

consisted of practical jokes made up for by the gift at the end. There were competitions for charming prizes, tents where the most luscious refreshments were to be enjoyed *ad lib*, amongst many other attractions. And at the close of the afternoon, when the sun's power waned, and autumn's nip began to be felt, autumn's early twilight to gather, the revellers borrowed the gay costumes provided and set their blood rioting with the exhilaration of a flower and confetti battle under the fairy lights festooned between high, decorated poles.

But to the Redlandsites the crowning of the whole proceedings was the Spanish ball. Refreshed by tea and a rest, they trooped after Pepita to decorate themselves from the piles of fascinating apparel which she had stowed temporarily in the long picture-gallery on account of its 'elbow room'. The girls showed great ingenuity in the manipulation of the clothes at their disposal, and presently, down the wide old staircase, swept as fair a company of 'señoritas' as ever graced filmy lace mantillas and coquetting fans.

In the lofty dining-hall, which had once been the Abbey's refectory, more transformation scenes had taken place. At one end a platform accommodated musicians in Spanish costume. At the other a crimson rope railed off a sitting-out place of, comfy divans and couches. The massive beams of the hall were hung with vari-coloured lamps that shed lime-

light rays on those who moved beneath them, and gave a chameleon-like effect to the dancers' lovely costumes.

Mrs. Malcolm, herself one of the gliding throng, was in great request as a partner, being bandied from one to another of the laughing girls and younger mistresses in a manner that vastly amused her father and her husband, who sat with Lady Denning and Miss Vene, all charmed spectators of the revelry.

It was to Pepita, however, that Guinevere sidled up half-way through the evening.

"Pep," she murmured, "you've partnered nearly everybody, I believe. Won't you dance with *me* now?"

Pepita's brilliant eyes fixed her quizzically. "If you're *quite* sure that I shan't tread on your toes . . ." she began teasingly, then, as the band struck up afresh, she whirled away in her rival's clasp.

The old Abbey clock was chiming midnight as she and Jill lingered in the lamp-hung porch listening to the cheers of departing Redlandsites, still floating back to them through the starlit night.

"*Hark* at them still!" chuckled Pepita. "No doubt about their having enjoyed it all."

"Enjoyed it!" echoed Jill. "I should jolly well say so. And I'm sure there isn't a girl among us who doesn't feel she sort of belongs to Denning too, now. The Malcolm motto, you know—'What I have

I hold'. The place has got hold of us all for evermore. Pep, you lucky, *lucky* thing!"

The black curls bobbed serenely. "Don't I know it! And it's got hold of Grandpa too. He says he shall be as often here as in Spain now, Malcolm permitting. So Denning will hold Mummy all right. Hip! hip! . . ."

And if the last cheer of the Abbey's perfect day lacked the volume of its predecessors, it carried just as much conviction to the smiling folk within its walls.

THE END